

Night Watches

W.W. JACOBS


NIGHT WATCHES

BOOKS BY W. W. JACOBS

EACH VOLUME ILLUSTRATED

PUBLISHED BY CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

NIGHT WATCHES	<i>net</i> \$1.25
SHIP'S COMPANY	<i>net</i> \$1.25
SAILORS' KNOTS	<i>net</i> \$1.25
SALTHAVEN	<i>net</i> \$1.25
SHORT CRUISES	<i>net</i> \$1.25
CAPTAINS ALL	<i>net</i> \$1.25
DIALSTONE LANE	<i>net</i> \$1.25
ODD CRAFT	<i>net</i> \$1.25
AT SUNWICH PORT	<i>net</i> \$1.25



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation



"I hope they won't meet 'er, pore thing," he ses

[Page 173]

LE
J147n

NIGHT WATCHES

BY
W. W. JACOBS

ILLUSTRATED BY STANLEY DAVIS

436385
14. 6. 45

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
NEW YORK.....1914

COPYRIGHT, 1914, BY
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

Published October, 1914



CONTENTS

I	
BACK TO BACK	PAGE I
II	
KEEPING WATCH	31
III	
THE UNDERSTUDY	53
IV	
THE WEAKER VESSEL	77
V	
STEPPING BACKWARDS	105
VI	
THE THREE SISTERS	131
VII	
THE UNKNOWN	151
V	

Contents

VIII

	PAGE
THE VIGIL	175

IX

EASY MONEY	199
----------------------	-----

X

HIS OTHER SELF	225
--------------------------	-----

ILLUSTRATIONS

"I hope they won't meet 'er, pore thing," he ses	<i>Frontispiece</i>
"Oh, Bill!" she gasped. "And by daylight, too!"	Facing page 4
"I'd pretty well swear he ain't the same dog" .	74
"You—you had better let me take care of that" .	102
Mrs. Ward and her daughter flung themselves hastily between the sergeant-major and his intended sacrifice	184
I got out at last by playing a game on her . . .	232

BACK TO BACK

Back to Back

MRS. SCUTTS, concealed behind the curtain, gazed at the cab in uneasy amazement. The cabman clambered down from the box and, opening the door, stood by with his hands extended ready for any help that might be needed. A stranger was the first to alight, and, with his back towards Mrs. Scutts, seemed to be struggling with something in the cab. He placed a dangling hand about his neck and, staggering under the weight, reeled backwards supporting Mr. Scutts, whose other arm was round the neck of a third man. In a flash Mrs. Scutts was at the door.

"Oh, Bill!" she gasped. "And by daylight, too!"

Mr. Scutts raised his head sharply and his

Back to Back

lips parted; then his head sank again, and he became a dead weight in the grasp of his assistants.

"He's all right," said one of them, turning to Mrs. Scutts.

A deep groan from Mr. Scutts confirmed the statement.

"What is it?" inquired his wife, anxiously.

"Just a little bit of a railway accident," said one of the strangers. "Train ran into some empty trucks. Nobody hurt—seriously," he added, in response to a terrible and annoyed groan from Mr. Scutts.

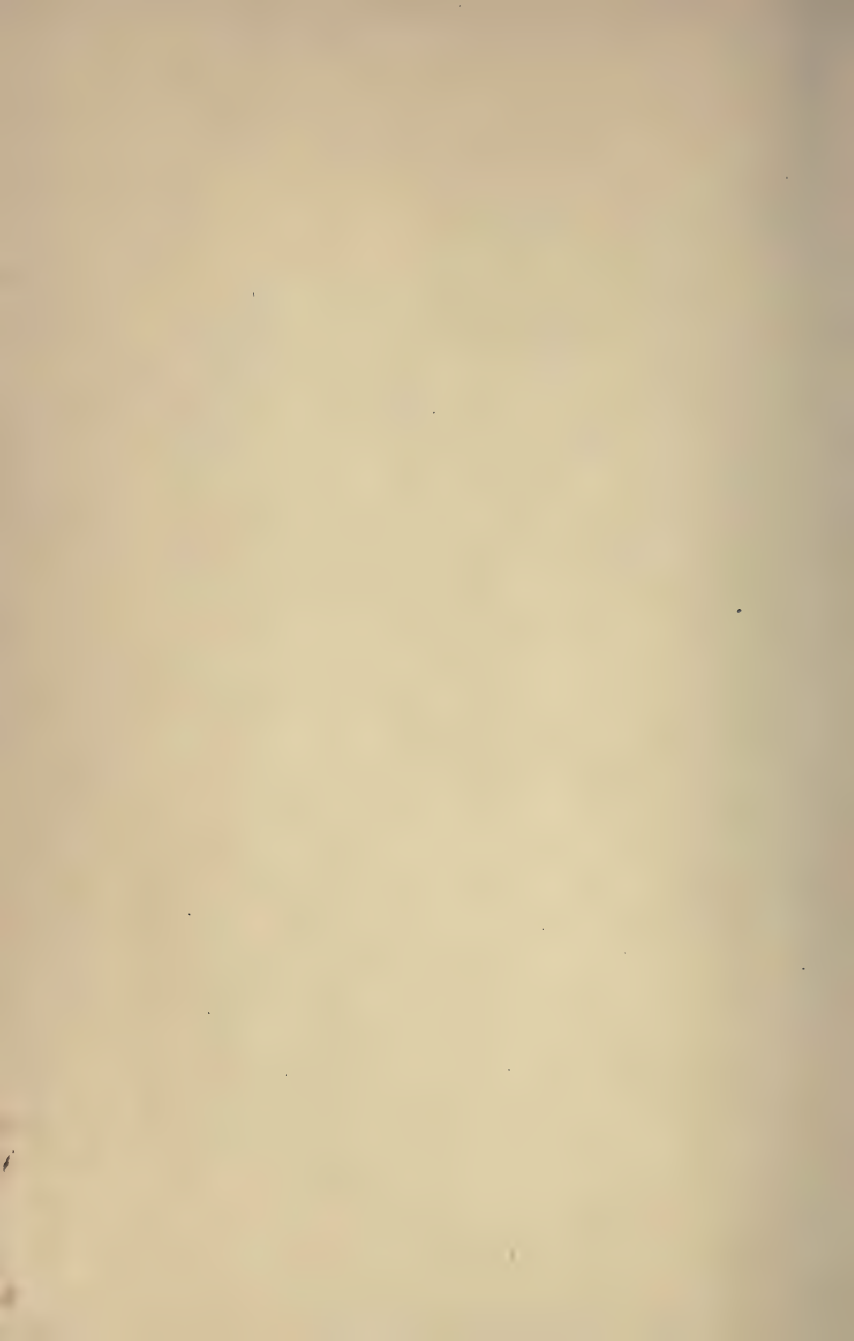
With his feet dragging helplessly, Mr. Scutts was conveyed over his own doorstep and placed on the sofa.

"All the others went off home on their own legs," said one of the strangers, reproachfully. "He said he couldn't walk, and he wouldn't go to a hospital."

"Wanted to die at home," declared the sufferer. "I ain't going to be cut about at no 'ospitals."



“Oh, Bill!” she gasped. “And by daylight, too!”



Back to Back

The two strangers stood by watching him; then they looked at each other.

"I don't want — no — 'ospitals," gasped Mr. Scutts. "I'm going to have my own doctor."

"Of course the company will pay the doctor's bill," said one of the strangers to Mrs. Scutts; "or they'll send their own doctor. I expect he'll be all right to-morrow."

"I 'ope so," said Mr. Scutts, "but I don't think it. Thank you for bringing of me 'ome."

He closed his eyes languidly, and kept them closed until the men had departed.

"Can't you walk, Bill?" inquired the tearful Mrs. Scutts.

Her husband shook his head. "You go and fetch the doctor," he said, slowly. "That new one round the corner."

"He looks such a boy," objected Mrs. Scutts.

"You go and fetch 'im," said Mr. Scutts, raising his voice. "D'ye hear!"

Back to Back

"But——" began his wife.

"If I get up to you, my gal," said the forgetful Mr. Scutts, "you'll know it."

"Why, I thought——" said his wife, in surprise.

Mr. Scutts raised himself on the sofa and shook his fist at her. Then, as a tribute to appearances, he sank back and groaned again. Mrs. Scutts, looking somewhat relieved, took her bonnet from a nail and departed.

The examination was long and tedious, but Mr. Scutts, beyond remarking that he felt chilly, made no complaint. He endeavoured, but in vain, to perform the tests suggested, and even did his best to stand, supported by his medical attendant. Self-preservation is the law of Nature, and when Mr. Scutts's legs and back gave way he saw to it that the doctor was underneath.

"We'll have to get you up to bed," said the latter, rising slowly and dusting himself.

Mr. Scutts, who was lying full length on the floor, acquiesced, and sent his wife for

Back to Back

some neighbours. One of them was a professional furniture-remover, and, half-way up the narrow stairs, the unfortunate had to remind him that he was dealing with a British working man, and not a piano. Four pairs of hands deposited Mr. Scutts with mathematical precision in the centre of the bed and then proceeded to tuck him in, while Mrs. Scutts drew the sheet in a straight line under his chin.

"Don't *look* much the matter with 'im," said one of the assistants.

"You can't tell with a face like that," said the furniture-remover. "It's wot you might call a 'appy face. Why, he was 'arf smiling as we carried 'im up the stairs."

"You're a liar," said Mr. Scutts, opening his eyes.

"All right, mate," said the furniture-remover; "all right. There's no call to get annoyed about it. Good old English pluck, I call it. Where d'you feel the pain?"

"All over," said Mr. Scutts, briefly.

Back to Back

His neighbours regarded him with sympathetic eyes, and then, led by the furniture-remover, filed out of the room on tip-toe. The doctor, with a few parting instructions, also took his departure.

"If you're not better by the morning," he said, pausing at the door, "you must send for your club doctor."

Mr. Scutts, in a feeble voice, thanked him, and lay with a twisted smile on his face listening to his wife's vivid narrative to the little crowd which had collected at the front door. She came back, followed by the next-door neighbour, Mr. James Flynn, whose offers of assistance ranged from carrying Mr. Scutts out pick-a-back when he wanted to take the air, to filling his pipe for him and fetching his beer.

"But I dare say you'll be up and about in a couple o' days," he concluded. "You wouldn't look so well if you'd got anything serious the matter; rosy, fat cheeks and——"

Back to Back

"That'll do," said the indignant invalid. "It's my back that's hurt, not my face."

"I know," said Mr. Flynn, nodding sagely; "but if it was hurt bad your face would be as white as that sheet—whiter."

"The doctor said as he was to be kep' quiet," remarked Mrs. Scutts, sharply.

"Right-o," said Mr. Flynn. "Ta-ta, old pal. Keep your pecker up, and if you want your back rubbed with turps, or anything of that sort, just knock on the wall."

He went, before Mr. Scutts could think of a reply suitable for an invalid and, at the same time, bristling with virility. A sinful and foolish desire to leap out of bed and help Mr. Flynn downstairs made him more rubicund than ever.

He sent for the club doctor next morning, and, pending his arrival, partook of a basin of arrowroot and drank a little beef-tea. A bottle of castor-oil and an empty pill-box on the table by the bedside added a little local colour to the scene.

Back to Back

"Any pain?" inquired the doctor, after an examination in which bony and very cold fingers had played a prominent part.

"Not much pain," said Mr. Scutts. "Don't seem to have no strength in my back."

"Ah!" said the doctor.

"I tried to get up this morning to go to my work," said Mr. Scutts, "but I can't stand—I couldn't get out of bed."

"Fearfully upset, he was, pore dear," testified Mrs. Scutts. "He can't bear losing a day. I s'pose—I s'pose the railway company will 'ave to do something if it's serious, won't they, sir?"

"Nothing to do with me," said the doctor. "I'll put him on the club for a few days; I expect he will be all right soon. He's got a healthy colour—a very healthy colour."

Mr. Scutts waited until he had left the house and then made a few remarks on the colour question that for impurity of English and strength of diction have probably never been surpassed.

Back to Back

A second visitor that day came after dinner—a tall man in a frock-coat, bearing in his hand a silk hat, which, after a careful survey of the room, he hung on a knob of the bed-post.

“Mr. Scutts?” he inquired, bowing.

“That’s me,” said Mr. Scutts, in a feeble voice.

“I’ve called from the railway company,” said the stranger. “We have seen now all those who left their names and addresses on Monday afternoon, and I am glad to say that nobody was really hurt. Nobody.”

Mr. Scutts, in a faint voice, said he was glad to hear it.

“Been a wonder if they had,” said the other, cheerfully. “Why, even the paint wasn’t knocked off the engine. The most serious damage appears to be two top-hats crushed and an umbrella broken.”

He leaned over the bed-rail and laughed joyously. Mr. Scutts, through half-closed eyes, gazed at him in silent reproach.

Back to Back

"I don't say that one or two people didn't receive a little bit of a shock to their nerves," said the visitor, thoughtfully. "One lady even stayed in bed next day. However, I made it all right with them. The company is very generous, and although of course there is no legal obligation, they made several of them a present of a few pounds, so that they could go away for a little change, or anything of that sort, to quiet their nerves."

Mr. Scutts, who had been listening with closed eyes, opened them languidly and said, "Oh."

"I gave one gentleman twen-ty pounds!" said the visitor, jingling some coins in his trouser-pocket. "I never saw a man so pleased and grateful in my life. When he signed the receipt for it—I always get them to sign a receipt, so that the company can see that I haven't kept the money for myself—he nearly wept with joy."

"I should think he would," said Mr. Scutts, slowly—"if he wasn't hurt."

Back to Back

"You're the last on my list," said the other, hastily. He produced a slip of paper from his pocket-book and placed it on the small table, with a fountain pen. Then, with a smile that was both tender and playful, he plunged his hand in his pocket and poured a stream of gold on the table.

"What do you say to thir-ty pounds?" he said, in a hushed voice. "Thir-ty golden goblins?"

"What for?" inquired Mr. Scutts, with a notable lack of interest.

"For—well, to go away for a day or two," said the visitor. "I find you in bed; it may be a cold or a bilious attack; or perhaps you had a little upset of the nerves when the trains kissed each other."

"I'm in bed—because—I can't walk—or stand," said Mr. Scutts, speaking very distinctly. "I'm on my club, and if as 'ow I get well in a day or two, there's no reason why the company should give me any money. I'm pore, but I'm honest."

Back to Back

"Take my advice as a friend," said the other; "take the money while you can get it."

He nodded significantly at Mr. Scutts and closed one eye. Mr. Scutts closed both of his.

"I 'ad my back hurt in the collision," he said, after a long pause. "I 'ad to be helped 'ome. So far it seems to get worse, but I 'ope for the best."

"Dear me," said the visitor; "how sad! I suppose it has been coming on for a long time. Most of these back cases do. At least all the doctors say so."

"It was done in the collision," said Mr. Scutts, mildly but firmly. "I was as right as rain before then."

The visitor shook his head and smiled. "Ah! you would have great difficulty in proving that," he said, softly; "in fact, speaking as man to man, I don't mind telling you it would be impossible. I'm afraid I'm exceeding my duty, but, as you're the last on

Back to Back

my list, suppose—suppose we say forty pounds. Forty! A small fortune.”

He added some more gold to the pile on the table, and gently tapped Mr. Scutts’s arm with the end of the pen.

“Good afternoon,” said the invalid.

The visitor, justly concerned at his lack of intelligence, took a seat on the edge of the bed and spoke to him as a friend and a brother, but in vain. Mr. Scutts reminded him at last that it was medicine-time, after which, pain and weakness permitting, he was going to try to get a little sleep.

“Forty pounds!” he said to his wife, after the official had departed. “Why didn’t ’e offer me a bag o’ sweets?”

“It’s a lot o’ money,” said Mrs. Scutts, wistfully.

“So’s a thousand,” said her husband. “I ain’t going to ’ave my back broke for nothing, I can tell you. Now, you keep that mouth o’ yours shut, and if I get it, you shall ’ave a new pair o’ boots.”

Back to Back

"A thousand!" exclaimed the startled Mrs. Scutts. "Have you took leave of your senses, or what?"

"I read a case in the paper where a man got it," said Mr. Scutts. "He 'ad his back 'urt too, pore chap. How would you like to lay on your back all your life for a thousand pounds?"

"Will you 'ave to lay abed all your life?" inquired his wife, staring.

"Wait till I get the money," said Mr. Scutts; "then I might be able to tell you better."

He gazed wistfully at the window. It was late October, but the sun shone and the air was clear. The sound of traffic and cheerful voices ascended from the little street. To Mr. Scutts it all seemed to be a part of a distant past.

"If that chap comes round to-morrow and offers me five hundred," he said, slowly, "I don't know as I won't take it. I'm sick of this mouldy bed."

Back to Back

He waited expectantly next day, but nothing happened, and after a week of bed he began to realize that the job might be a long one. The monotony, to a man of his active habits, became almost intolerable, and the narrated adventures of Mr. James Flynn, his only caller, filled him with an uncontrollable longing to be up and doing.

The fine weather went, and Mr. Scutts, in his tumbled bed, lay watching the rain beating softly on the window-panes. Then one morning he awoke to the darkness of a London fog.

"It gets worse and worse," said Mrs. Scutts, as she returned home in the afternoon with a relish for his tea. "Can't see your 'and before your face."

Mr. Scutts looked thoughtful. He ate his tea in silence, and after he had finished lit his pipe and sat up in bed smoking.

"Penny for your thoughts," said his wife.

"I'm going out," said Mr. Scutts, in a voice that defied opposition. "I'm going to

Back to Back

'ave a walk, and when I'm far enough away I'm going to 'ave one or two drinks. I believe this fog is sent a-purpose to save my life."

Mrs. Scutts remonstrated, but in vain, and at half-past six the invalid, with his cap over his eyes and a large scarf tied round the lower part of his face, listened for a moment at his front door and then disappeared in the fog.

Left to herself, Mrs. Scutts returned to the bedroom and, poking the tiny fire into a blaze, sat and pondered over the wilfulness of men.

She was awakened from a doze by a knocking at the street-door. It was just eight o'clock, and, inwardly congratulating her husband on his return to common sense and home, she went down and opened it. Two tall men in silk hats entered the room.

"Mrs. Scutts?" said one of them.

Mrs. Scutts, in a dazed fashion, nodded.

"We have come to see your husband," said the intruder. "I am a doctor."

The panic-stricken Mrs. Scutts tried in vain to think.

Back to Back

"He—he's asleep," she said, at last.

"Doesn't matter," said the doctor.

"Not a bit," said his companion.

"You—you can't see him," protested Mrs. Scutts. "He ain't to be seen."

"He'd be sorry to miss me," said the doctor, eyeing her keenly as she stood on guard by the inner door. "I suppose he's at home?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Scutts, stammering and flushing. "Why, the pore man can't stir from his bed."

"Well, I'll just peep in at the door, then," said the doctor. "I won't wake him. You can't object to that. If you do——"

Mrs. Scutts's head began to swim. "I'll go up and see whether he's awake," she said.

She closed the door on them and stood with her hand to her throat, thinking. Then, instead of going upstairs, she passed into the yard and, stepping over the fence, opened Mr. Flynn's back door.

"Halloa!" said that gentleman, who was

Back to Back

standing in the scullery removing mud from his boots. "What's up?"

In a frenzied gabble Mrs. Scutts told him. "You must be 'im," she said, clutching him by the coat and dragging him towards the door. "They've never seen 'im, and they won't know the difference."

"But——" exclaimed the astonished James.

"Quick!" she said, sharply. "Go into the back room and undress, then nip into his room and get into bed. And mind, be fast asleep all the time."

Still holding the bewildered Mr. Flynn by the coat, she led him into the house and waved him upstairs, and stood below listening until a slight creaking of the bed announced that he had obeyed orders. Then she entered the parlour.

"He's fast asleep," she said, softly; "and mind, I won't 'ave him disturbed. It's the first real sleep he's 'ad for nearly a week. If you promise not to wake 'im you may just have a peep."

Back to Back

"We won't disturb him," said the doctor, and, followed by his companion, noiselessly ascended the stairs and peeped into the room. Mr. Flynn was fast asleep, and not a muscle moved as the two men approached the bed on tip-toe and stood looking at him. The doctor turned after a minute and led the way out of the room.

"We'll call again," he said, softly.

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Scutts. "When?"

The doctor and his companion exchanged glances. "I'm very busy just at present," he said, slowly. "We'll look in some time and take our chance of catching him awake."

Mrs. Scutts bowed them out, and in some perplexity returned to Mr. Flynn. "I don't like the look of 'em," she said, shaking her head. "You'd better stay in bed till Bill comes 'ome in case they come back."

"Right-o," said the obliging Mr. Flynn. "Just step in and tell my landlady I'm 'aving a chat with Bill."

He lit his pipe and sat up in bed smoking

Back to Back

until a knock at the front door at half-past eleven sent him off to sleep again. Mrs. Scutts, who was sitting downstairs, opened it and admitted her husband.

"All serene?" he inquired. "What are you looking like that for? What's up?"

He sat quivering with alarm and rage as she told him, and then, mounting the stairs with a heavy tread, stood gazing in helpless fury at the slumbering form of Mr. James Flynn.

"Get out o' my bed," he said at last, in a choking voice.

"What, Bill!" said Mr. Flynn, opening his eyes.

"Get out o' my bed," repeated the other. "You've made a nice mess of it between you. It's a fine thing if a man can't go out for 'arf a pint without coming home and finding all the riff-raff of the neighbourhood in 'is bed."

"Ow's the pore back, Bill?" inquired Mr. Flynn, with tenderness.

Back to Back

Mr. Scutts gurgled at him. "Outside!" he said as soon as he could get his breath.

"Bill," said the voice of Mrs. Scutts, outside the door.

"Halloa," growled her husband.

"He mustn't go," said Mrs. Scutts. "Those gentlemen are coming again, and they think he is you."

"WHAT!" roared the infuriated Mr. Scutts.

"Don't you see? It's me what's got the pore back now, Bill," said Mr. Flynn. "You can't pass yourself off as me, Bill; you ain't good-looking enough."

Mr. Scutts, past speech, raised his clenched fists to the ceiling.

"He'll 'ave to stay in your bed," continued the voice of Mrs. Scutts. "He's got a good 'art, and I know he'll do it; won't you, Jim?"

Mr. Flynn pondered. "Tell my landlady in the morning that I've took your back room," he said. "What a fortunit thing it is I'm out o' work. What are you walking

Back to Back

up and down like that for, Bill? Back coming on agin?"

"Then o' course," pursued the voice of Mrs. Scutts, in meditative accents, "there's the club doctor and the other gentleman that knows Bill. They might come at any moment. There's got to be two Bills in bed, so that if one party comes one Bill can nip into the back room, and if the other Bill—party, I mean—comes, the other Bill—you know what I mean!"

Mr. Scutts swore himself faint.

"That's 'ow it is, mate," said Mr. Flynn. "It's no good standing there saying your little piece of poetry to yourself. Take off your clo'es and get to bed like a little man. Now! now! Naughty! Naughty!"

"P'r'aps I oughtn't to 'ave let 'em up, Bill," said his wife; "but I was afraid they'd smell a rat if I didn't. Besides, I was took by surprise."

"You get off to bed," said Mr. Scutts. "Get off to bed while you're safe."

Back to Back

“And get a good night’s rest,” added the thoughtful Mr. Flynn. “If Bill’s back is took bad in the night I’ll look after it.”

Mr. Scutts turned a threatening face on him. “For two pins——” he began.

“For two pins I’ll go back ’ome and stay there,” said Mr. Flynn.

He put one muscular leg out of bed, and then, at the earnest request of Mr. Scutts, put it back again. In a few simple, manly words the latter apologized, by putting all the blame on Mrs. Scutts, and, removing his clothes, got into bed.

Wrapped in bedclothes, they passed the following day listening for knocks at the door and playing cards. By evening both men were weary, and Mr. Scutts made a few pointed remarks concerning dodging doctors and deceitful visitors to which Mr. Flynn listened in silent approval.

“They mightn’t come for a week,” he said, dismally. “It’s all right for you, but where do I come in? Halves?”

Back to Back

Mr. Scutts had a rush of blood to the head.

"You leave it to me, mate," he said, controlling himself by an effort. "If I get ten quid, say, you shall have 'arf."

"And suppose you get more?" demanded the other.

"We'll see," said Mr. Scutts, vaguely.

Mr. Flynn returned to the charge next day, but got no satisfaction. Mr. Scutts preferred to talk instead of the free board and lodging his friend was getting. On the subject of such pay for such work he was almost eloquent.

"I'll bide my time," said Mr. Flynn, darkly. "Treat me fair and I'll treat you fair."

His imprisonment came to an end on the fourth day. There was a knock at the door, and the sound of men's voices, followed by the hurried appearance of Mrs. Scutts.

"It's *Jim's* lot," she said, in a hurried whisper. "I've just come up to get the room ready."

Mr. Scutts took his friend by the hand, and

Back to Back

after warmly urging him not to forget the expert instructions he had received concerning his back, slipped into the back room, and, a prey to forebodings, awaited the result.

"Well, he looks better," said the doctor, regarding Mr. Flynn.

"Much better," said his companion.

Mrs. Scutts shook her head. "His pore back don't seem no better, sir," she said in a low voice. "Can't you do something for it?"

"Let me have a look at it," said the doctor. "Undo your shirt."

Mr. Flynn, with slow fingers, fumbled with the button at his neck and looked hard at Mrs. Scutts.

"She can't bear to see me suffer," he said, in a feeble voice, as she left the room.

He bore the examination with the fortitude of an early Christian martyr. In response to inquiries he said he felt as though the main-spring of his back had gone.

"How long since you walked?" inquired the doctor.

Back to Back

"Not since the accident," said Mr. Flynn, firmly.

"Try now," said the doctor.

Mr. Flynn smiled at him reproachfully.

"You can't walk because you think you can't," said the doctor; "that is all. You'll have to be encouraged the same way that a child is. I should like to cure you, and I think I can."

He took a small canvas bag from the other man and opened it. "Forty pounds," he said. "Would you like to count it?"

Mr. Flynn's eyes shone.

"It is all yours," said the doctor, "if you can walk across the room and take it from that gentleman's hand."

"Honour bright?" asked Mr. Flynn, in tremulous tones, as the other man held up the bag and gave him an encouraging smile.

"Honour bright," said the doctor.

With a spring that nearly broke the bed, Mr. Flynn quitted it and snatched the bag,

Back to Back

and at the same moment Mrs. Scutts, impelled by a maddened arm, burst into the room.

"Your back!" she moaned. "It'll kill you Get back to bed."

"I'm cured, lovey," said Mr. Flynn, simply.

"His back is as strong as ever," said the doctor, giving it a thump.

Mr. Flynn, who had taken his clothes from a chair and was hastily dressing himself, assented.

"But if you'll wait 'arf a tick I'll walk as far as the corner with you," he said, quickly. "I'd like to make sure it's all right."

He paused at the foot of the stairs and, glancing up at the palid and murderous face of Mr. Scutts, which protruded from the back bedroom, smiled at him rapturously. Then, with a lordly air, he tossed him five pieces of gold.

KEEPING WATCH

Keeping Watch

“**H**UMAN natur’!” said the night-watchman, gazing fixedly at a pretty girl in a passing waterman’s skiff. “Human natur’!”

He sighed, and, striking a match, applied it to his pipe and sat smoking thoughtfully.

“The young fellow is pretending that his arm is at the back of her by accident,” he continued; “and she’s pretending not to know that it’s there. When he’s allowed to put it round ’er waist whenever he wishes, he won’t want to do it. She’s artful enough to know that, and that’s why they are all so stand-offish until the thing is settled. She’ll move forward ’arf an inch presently, and ’arf a minute arterwards she’ll lean back agin without thinking. She’s a nice-looking gal, and what she can see in a tailor’s dummy like that, I can’t think.”

Keeping Watch

He leaned back on his box and, folding his arms, emitted a cloud of smoke.

“Human natur’s a funny thing. I’ve seen a lot of it in my time, and if I was to ’ave my life all over agin I expect I should be just as silly as them two in the skiff. I’ve known the time when I would spend money as free over a gal as I would over myself. I on’y wish I’d got all the money now that I’ve spent on peppermint lozenges.

“That gal in the boat reminds me o’ one I used to know a few years ago. Just the same innercent baby look—a look as if butter wouldn’t melt in ’er mouth—and a artful disposition that made me sorry for ’er sects.

“She used to come up to this wharf once a week in a schooner called the *Belle*. Her father, Cap’n Butt, was a widow-man, and ’e used to bring her with ’im, partly for company and partly because ’e could keep ’is eye on her. Nasty eye it was, too, when he ’appened to be out o’ temper.

“I’d often took a bit o’ notice o’ the gal;

Keeping Watch

just giving 'er a kind smile now and then as she sat on deck, and sometimes—when 'er father wasn't looking—she'd smile back. Once, when 'e was down below, she laughed right out. She was afraid of 'im, and by and by I noticed that she daren't even get off the ship and walk up and down the wharf without asking 'im. When she went out 'e was with 'er, and, from one or two nasty little snacks I 'appened to overhear when the skipper thought I was too far away, I began to see that something was up.

“It all came out one evening, and it only came out because the skipper wanted my help. I was standing leaning on my broom to get my breath back arter a bit o' sweeping, when he came up to me, and I knew at once, by the nice way 'e spoke, that he wanted me to do something for 'im.

“‘Come and 'ave a pint, Bill,’ he ses.

“I put my broom agin the wall, and we walked round to the Bull's Head like a couple o' brothers. We 'ad two pints apiece, and

Keeping Watch

then he put his 'and on my shoulder and talked as man to man.

“ ‘I’m in a little bit o’ difficulty about that gal o’ mine,’ he ses, passing me his baccy-box. ‘Six months ago she dropped a letter out of ’er pocket, and I’m blest if it wasn’t from a young man. A young *man* !’

“ ‘You sur-prise me,’ I ses, meaning to be sarcastic.

“ ‘I surprised her,’ he ses, looking very fierce. ‘I went to ’er box and I found a pile of ’em—a pile of ’em—tied up with a piece o’ pink ribbon. And a photygraph of my lord. And of all the narrer-chested, weak-eyed, slack-baked, spindly-legged sons of a gun you ever saw in your life, he is the worst. If I on’y get my ’ands on him I’ll choke ’im with his own feet.’

“ ‘He washed ’is mouth out with a drop o’ beer and stood scowling at the floor.

“ ‘Arter I’ve choked ’im I’ll twist his neck,’ he ses. ‘If he ’ad on’y put his address on ’is letters, I’d go round and do it now. And my

Keeping Watch

daughter, my only daughter, won't tell me where he lives.'

" 'She ought to know better,' I ses.

" 'He took hold o' my 'and and shook it. 'You've got more sense than one 'ud think to look at you, Bill,' he ses, not thinking wot he was saying. 'You see wot a mess I'm in.'

" 'Yes,' I ses.

" 'I'm a nurse, that's wot I am,' he ses, very savage. 'Just a nursemaid. I can't move 'and or foot without that gal. 'Ow'd you like it, yourself, Bill?'

" 'It must be very orkard for you,' I ses. 'Very orkard indeed.'

" 'Orkard!' he ses; 'it's no name for it, Bill. I might as well be a Sunday-school teacher, and ha' done with it. I never 'ad such a dull time in all my life. Never. And the worst of it is, it's spiling my temper. And all because o' that narrer-eyed, red-chested—you know wot I mean!'

" 'He took another mouthful o' beer, and then he took 'old of my arm. 'Bill,' he

Keeping Watch

ses, very earnest, 'I want you to do me a favour.'

" 'Go ahead,' I ses.

" 'I've got to meet a pal at Charing Cross at ha'-past seven,' he ses; 'and we're going to make a night of it. I've left Winnie in charge o' the cook, and I've told 'im plain that, if she ain't there when I come back, I'll skin 'im alive. Now, I want you to watch 'er, too. Keep the gate locked, and don't let anybody in you don't know. Especially that monkey-faced imitation of a man. Here 'e is. That's his likeness.'

"He pulled a photygraph out of 'is coat-pocket and 'anded it to me.

" 'That's 'im,' he ses. 'Fancy a gal getting love-letters from a thing like that! And she was on'y twenty last birthday. Keep your eye on 'er, Bill, and don't let 'er out of your sight. You're worth two o' the cook.'

"He finished 'is beer, and, cuddling my arm, stepped back to the wharf. Miss Butt was sitting on the cabin skylight reading a

Keeping Watch

book, and old Joe, the cook, was standing near 'er pretending to swab the decks with a mop.

“ ‘I’ve got to go out for a little while—on business,’ ses the skipper. ‘I don’t s’pose I shall be long, and, while I’m away, Bill and the cook will look arter you.’

“Miss Butt wrinkled up 'er shoulders.

“ ‘The gate’ll be locked, and you’re not to leave the wharf. D’ye ’ear?’

“The gal wriggled 'er shoulders agin and went on reading, but she gave the cook a look out of 'er innercent baby eyes that nearly made 'im drop the mop.

“ ‘Them’s my orders,’ ses the skipper, swelling his chest and looking round, ‘to everybody. You know wot’ll ’appen to you, Joe, if things ain’t right when I come back. Come along, Bill, and lock the gate arter me. An’ mind, for your own sake, don’t let anything ’appen to that gal while I’m away.’

“ ‘Wot time’ll you be back?’ I ses, as 'e stepped through the wicket.

“ ‘Not afore twelve, and p'r'aps a good bit

Keeping Watch

later,' he ses, smiling all over with 'appiness. 'But young slab-chest don't know I'm out, and Winnie thinks I'm just going out for 'arf an hour, so it'll be all right. So long.'

"I watched 'im up the road, and I must say I began to wish I 'adn't taken the job on. Arter all, I 'ad on'y had two pints and a bit o' flattery, and I knew wot 'ud 'appen if anything went wrong. Built like a bull he was, and fond o' using his strength. I locked the wicket careful, and, putting the key in my pocket, began to walk up and down the wharf.

"For about ten minutes the gal went on reading and didn't look up once. Then, as I passed, she gave me a nice smile and shook 'er little fist at the cook, wot 'ad got 'is back towards 'er. I smiled back, o' course, and by and by she put her book down and climbed on to the side o' the ship and held out her 'and for me to 'elp her ashore.

"'I'm so tired of the ship,' she ses, in a soft voice; 'it's like a prison. Don't you get tired of the wharf?'

Keeping Watch

“ ‘Sometimes,’ I ses; ‘but it’s my dooty.’ ”

“ ‘Yes,’ she ses. ‘Yes, of course. But you’re a big, strong man, and you can put up with things better.’ ”

“She gave a little sigh, and we walked up and down for a time without saying anything.

“ ‘And it’s all father’s foolishness,’ she ses, at last; ‘that’s wot makes it so tiresome. I can’t help a pack of silly young men writing to me, can I?’ ”

“ ‘No, I s’pose not,’ I ses.

“ ‘Thank you,’ she ses, putting ’er little ’and on my arm. ‘I knew that you were sensible. I’ve often watched you when I’ve been sitting alone on the schooner, longing for somebody to speak to. And I’m a good judge of character. I can read you like a book.’ ”

“She turned and looked up at me. Beautiful blue eyes she’d got, with long, curling lashes, and teeth like pearls.

“ ‘Father is so silly,’ she ses, shaking her ’ead and looking down; ‘and it’s so unreasonable,

Keeping Watch

because, as a matter of fact, I don't like young men. Oh, I beg your pardon, I didn't mean that. I didn't mean to be rude.'

" 'Rude?' I ses, staring at her.

" 'Of course it was a rude thing for me to say,' she ses, smiling; 'because you are still a young man yourself.'

"I shook my 'ead. 'Youngish,' I ses.

" 'Young!' she ses, stamping 'er little foot.

"She gave me another look, and this time 'er blue eyes seemed large and solemn. She walked along like one in a dream, and twice she tripped over the planks and would 'ave fallen if I hadn't caught 'er round the waist.

" 'Thank you,' she ses. 'I'm very clumsy. How strong your arm is!'

"We walked up and down agin, and every time we went near the edge of the jetty she 'eld on to my arm for fear of stumbling agin. And there was that silly cook standing about on the schooner on tip-toe and twisting his silly old neck till I wonder it didn't twist off.

" 'Wot a beautiful evening it is!' she ses,

Keeping Watch

at last, in a low voice. 'I 'ope father isn't coming back early. Do you know wot time he is coming home?'

" 'About twelve,' I ses; 'but don't tell 'im I told you so.'

" 'O' course not,' she ses, squeezing my arm. 'Poor father! I hope he is enjoying himself as much as I am.'

"We walked down to the jetty agin arter that, and sat side by side looking acrost the river. And she began to talk about Life, and wot a strange thing it was; and 'ow the river would go on flowing down to the sea thousands and thousands o' years arter we was both dead and forgotten. If it hadn't ha' been for her little 'ead leaning agin my shoulder I should have 'ad the creeps.

" 'Let's go down into the cabin,' she ses, at last, with a little shiver; 'it makes me melancholy sitting here and thinking of the "might-have-beens." '

"I got up first and 'elped her up, and, arter both staring hard at the cook, wot didn't seem

Keeping Watch

to know 'is place, we went down into the cabin. It was a comfortable little place, and arter she 'ad poured me out a glass of 'er father's whisky, and filled my pipe for me, I wouldn't ha' changed places with a king. Even when the pipe wouldn't draw I didn't mind.

“ ‘May I write a letter?’ she ses, at last.

“ ‘Sartainly,’ I ses.

“ ‘She got out her pen and ink and paper, and wrote. ‘I sha’n’t be long,’ she ses, looking up and nibbling 'er pen. ‘It’s a letter to my dressmaker; she promised my dress by six o’clock this afternoon, and I am just writing to tell her that if I don’t have it by ten in the morning she can keep it.’

“ ‘Quite right,’ I ses; ‘it’s the on’y way to get things done.’

“ ‘It’s *my* way,’ she ses, sticking the letter in an envelope and licking it down. ‘Nice name, isn’t it?’

“ ‘She passed it over to me, and I read the name and address: ‘Miss Minnie Miller, 17, John Street, Mile End Road.’

Keeping Watch

“‘That’ll wake her up,’ she ses, smiling. ‘Will you ask Joe to take it for me?’”

“‘He—he’s on guard,’ I ses, smiling back at ’er and shaking my ’ead.

“‘I know,’ she ses, in a low voice. ‘But I don’t want any guard—only you. I don’t like guards that peep down skylights.’”

“I looked up just in time to see Joe’s ’ead disappear. Then I nipped up, and arter I ’ad told ’im part of wot I thought about ’im I gave ’im the letter and told ’im to sheer off.

“‘The skipper told me to stay ’ere,’ he ses, looking obstinate.

“‘You do as you’re told,’ I ses. ‘I’m in charge, and I take full responsibility. I shall lock the gate arter you. Wot are you worrying about?’”

“‘And here’s a shilling, Joe, for a bus fare,’ ses the gal, smiling. ‘You can keep the change.’”

“Joe took off ’is cap and scratched ’is silly bald ’ead.

Keeping Watch

“ ‘Come on,’ I ses; ‘it’s a letter to a dress-maker. A letter that must go to-night.’ ”

“ ‘Else it’s no use,’ ses the gal. ‘You don’t know ’ow important it is.’ ”

“ ‘All right,’ ses Joe. ‘’Ave it your own way. So long as you don’t tell the skipper I don’t mind. If anything ’appens you’ll catch it too, Bill.’ ”

“He climbed ashore, and I follered ’im to the gate and unlocked it. He was screwing up ’is eye ready for a wink, but I give ’im such a look that he thought better of it, and, arter rubbing his eye with ’is finger as though he ’ad got a bit o’ dust in it, he went off.

“I locked the gate and went back to the cabin, and for some time we sat talking about fathers and the foolish ideas they got into their ’eads, and things o’ that sort. So far as I remember, I ’ad two more goes o’ whisky and one o’ the skipper’s cigars, and I was just thinking wot a beautiful thing it was to be alive and ’ealthy and in good spirits, talking to a nice gal that understood wot you said

Keeping Watch

a'most afore you said it, when I 'eard three blows on a whistle.

" 'Wot's that?' I ses, starting up. 'Police whistle?'

" 'I don't think so,' ses Miss Butt, putting her 'and on my shoulder. 'Sit down and stay where you are. I don't want *you* to get hurt, if it is. Let somebody I don't like go.'

"I sat down agin and listened, but there was no more whistling.

" 'Boy in the street, I expect,' ses the gal, going into the state-room. 'Oh, I've got something to show you. Wait a minute.'

"I 'eard her moving about, and then she comes back into the cabin.

" 'I can't find the key of my box,' she ses, 'and it's in there. I wonder whether you've got a key that would open it. It's a padlock.'

"I put my 'and in my pocket and pulled out my keys. 'Shall I come and try?' I ses.

" 'No, thank you,' she ses, taking the keys. 'This looks about the size. What key is it?'

Keeping Watch

“‘It’s the key of the gate,’ I ses, ‘but I don’t suppose it’ll fit.’

“She went back into the state-room agin, and I ’eard her fumbling at a lock. Then she came back into the cabin, breathing rather hard, and stood thinking.

“‘I’ve just remembered,’ she ses, pinching her chin. ‘Yes!’

“She stepped to the door and went up the companion-ladder, and the next moment I ’eard a sliding noise and a key turn in a lock. I jumped to the foot of the ladder and, ’ardly able to believe my senses, saw that the hatch was closed. When I found that it was locked too, you might ha’ knocked me down with a feather.

“I went down to the cabin agin, and, standing on the locker, pushed the skylight up with my ’ead and tried to look out. I couldn’t see the gate, but I ’eard voices and footsteps, and a little while arterwards I see that gal coming along the wharf arm in arm with the young man she ’ad told me she didn’t like,

Keeping Watch

and dancing for joy. They climbed on to the schooner, and then they both stooped down with their hands on their knees and looked at me.

“ ‘Wot is it?’ ses the young man, grinning.

“ ‘It’s a watchman,’ ses the gal. ‘It’s here to take charge of the wharf, you know, and see that nobody comes on.’

“ ‘We ought to ha’ brought some buns for it,’ ses the young man; ‘look at it opening its mouth.’

“ ‘They both laughed fit to kill themselves, but I didn’t move a muscle.

“ ‘You open the companion,’ I ses, ‘or it’ll be the worse for you. D’ye hear? Open it!’

“ ‘Oh, Alfred,’ ses the gal, ‘he’s losing ’is temper. Wotever shall we do?’

“ ‘I don’t want no more nonsense,’ I ses, trying to fix ’er with my eye. ‘If you don’t let me out it’ll be the worse for you.’

“ ‘Don’t you talk to my young lady like that,’ ses the young man.

Keeping Watch

“ ‘Your young lady?’ I ses. ‘*H’mmm!* You should ha’ seen ’er ’arf an hour ago.’

“The gal looked at me steady for a moment.

“ ‘He put ’is nasty fat arm round my waist, Alfred,’ she ses.

“ ‘*Wot!*’ ses the young man, squeaking. ‘*WOT!*’

“He snatched up the mop wot that nasty, untidy cook ’ad left leaning agin the side, and afore I ’ad any idea of wot ’e was up to he shoved the beastly thing straight in my face.

“ ‘Next time,’ he ses, ‘I’ll tear you limb from limb!’

“I couldn’t speak for a time, and when I could ’e stopped me with the mop agin. It was like a chained lion being tormented by a monkey. I stepped down on to the cabin floor, and then I told ’em both wot I thought of ’em.

“ ‘Come along, Alfred,’ ses the gal, ‘else the cook’ll be back before we start.’

“ ‘He’s all right,’ ses the young man. ‘Minnie’s looking arter him. When I left he’d got ’arf a bottle of whisky in front of ’im.’

Keeping Watch

“ ‘Still, we may as well go,’ ses Miss Butt. ‘It seems a shame to keep the cab waiting.’ ”

“ ‘All right,’ he ses. ‘I just want to give this old chump one more lick with the mop and then we’ll go.’ ”

“He peeped down the skylight and waited, but I kept quite quiet, with my back towards ’im.

“ ‘Come along,’ ses Miss Butt.

“ ‘I’m coming,’ he ses. ‘Hi! You down there! When the cap’n comes back tell ’im that I’m taking Miss Butt to an aunt o’ mine in the country. And tell ’im that in a week or two he’ll ’ave the largest and nicest piece of wedding-cake he ’as ever ’ad in his life. So long!’ ”

“ ‘Good-bye, watchman,’ ses the gal.

“They moved off without another word—from them, I mean. I heard the wicket slam and then I ’eard a cab drive off over the stones. I couldn’t believe it at first. I couldn’t believe a gal with such beautiful blue eyes could be so hard-earted, and for a long time I stood listening and hoping to ’ear the

Keeping Watch

cab come back. Then I stepped up to the companion and tried to shift it with my shoulders.

“I went back to the cabin at last, and arter lighting the lamp I ’ad another sup o’ the skipper’s whisky to clear my ’ead, and sat down to try and think wot tale I was to tell ’im. I sat for pretty near three hours without thinking of one, and then I ’eard the crew come on to the wharf.

“They was a bit startled when they saw my ’ead at the skylight, and then they all started at the same time asking me wot I was doing. I told ’em to let me out fust and then I’d tell ’em, and one of ’em ’ad just stepped round to the companion when the skipper come on to the wharf and stepped aboard. He stooped down and peeped at me through the skylight as though he couldn’t believe ’is eyesight, and then, arter sending the hands for’ard and telling ’em to stay there, *wotever ’appened*, he unlocked the companion and came down.”

THE UNDERSTUDY

The Understudy

“**D**OGS on board ship is a nuisance,” said the night-watchman, gazing fiercely at the vociferous mongrel that had chased him from the deck of the *Henry William* ; “the skipper asks me to keep an eye on the ship, and then leaves a thing like that down in the cabin.”

He leaned against a pile of empty casks to recover his breath, shook his fist at the dog, and said, slowly—

Some people can't make too much of 'em. They talk about a dog's honest eyes and his faithful 'art. I 'ad a dog once, and I never saw his eyes look so honest as they did one day when 'e was sitting on a pound o' beef-steak we was 'unting high and low for.

I've known dogs to cause a lot of trouble in my time. A man as used to live in my

The Understudy

street told me he 'ad been in jail three times because dogs follered him 'ome and wouldn't go away when he told 'em to. He said that some men would ha' kicked 'em out into the street, but he thought their little lives was far too valuable to risk in that way.

Some people used to wink when 'e talked like that, but I didn't: I remembered a dog that took a fancy to old Sam Small and Ginger Dick and Peter Russet once in just the same way.

It was one night in a little public-'ouse down Commercial Road way. They 'ad on'y been ashore a week, and, 'aving been turned out of a music-'all the night afore because a man Ginger Dick had punched in the jaw wouldn't behave 'imself, they said they'd spend the rest o' their money on beer instead. There was just the three of 'em sitting by themselves in a cosy little bar, when the door was pushed open and a big black dog came in.

He came straight up to Sam and licked his 'and. Sam was eating a arrowroot biscuit

The Understudy

with a bit o' cheese on it at the time. He wasn't wot you'd call a partickler sort o' man, but, seeing as 'ow the dog was so careless that 'e licked the biscuit a'most as much as he did his 'and, he gave it to 'im. The dog took it in one gulp, and then he jumped up on Sam's lap and wagged his tail in 'is face for joy and thankfulness.

"He's took a fancy to you, Sam," ses Ginger.

Sam pushed the dog off on to the floor and wiped his face.

"He's a good dog, by the look of 'im," ses Peter Russet, who was country bred.

He bought a sausage-roll, and him and the dog ate it between 'em. Then Ginger Dick bought one and gave it to 'im, and by the time it was finished the dog didn't seem to know which one of 'em he loved the most.

"Wonder who he belongs to?" ses Ginger.
"Is there any name on the collar, Peter?"

Peter shook his 'ead. "It's a good collar, though," he ses. "I wonder whether he's been and lost 'imself?"

The Understudy

Old Sam, wot was always on the look-out for money, put his beer down and wiped 'is mouth. "There might be a reward out for 'im," he ses. "I think I'll take care of 'im for a day or two, in case."

"We'll all take care of 'im," ses Ginger; "and if there's a reward we'll go shares. Mind that!"

"I found 'im," ses Sam, very disagreeable. "He came up to me as if he'd known me all 'is life."

"No," ses Ginger. "Don't you flatter yourself. He came up to you because he didn't know you, Sam."

"If he 'ad, he'd ha' *bit* your 'and," ses Peter Russet.

"Instead o' washing it," ses Ginger.

"Go on!" ses Sam, 'olding his breath with passion. "Go on!"

Peter opened 'is mouth, but just then another man came into the bar, and, arter ordering 'is drink, turned round and patted the dog's 'ead.

The Understudy

"That's a good dog; 'ow old is he?" he ses to Ginger.

"Two years last April," ses Ginger, without moving a eyelid.

"*Fifth* of April," ses old Sam, very quick and fierce.

"At two o'clock in the morning," ses Peter.

The man took up 'is beer and looked at 'em; then 'e took a drink and looked at 'em again. Arter which he 'ad another look at the dog.

"I could see 'e was very valuable," he ses. "I see that the moment I set eyes on 'im. Mind you don't get 'im stole."

He finished up 'is beer and went out; and he 'ad 'ardly gone afore Ginger took a piece o' thick string out of 'is pocket and fastened it to the dog's collar.

"Make yourself at 'ome, Ginger," ses Sam, very nasty.

"I'm going to," ses Ginger. "That chap knows something about dogs, and, if we can't get a reward for 'im, p'r'aps we can sell 'im."

They 'ad another arf-pint each, and then,

The Understudy

Ginger taking 'old of the string, they went out into the street.

"Nine o'clock," ses Peter. "It's no good going 'ome yet, Ginger."

"We can 'ave a glass or two on the way," ses Ginger; "but I sha'n't feel comfortable in my mind till we've got the dog safe 'ome. P'r'aps the people wot 'ave lost it are looking for it now."

They 'ad another drink farther on, and a man in the bar took such a fancy to the dog that 'e offered Ginger five shillings for it and drinks round.

"That shows 'ow valuable it is," ses Peter Russet when they got outside. "Hold that string tight, Ginger. Wot's the matter?"

"He won't come," ses Ginger, tugging at the string. "Come on, old chap! Good dog! Come on!"

He stood there pulling at the dog, wot was sitting down and being dragged along on its stummick. He didn't know its name, but 'e called it a few things that seemed to ease 'is

The Understudy

mind, and then he 'anded over the string to Sam, wot 'ad been asking for it, and told 'im to see wot *he* could do.

"We shall 'ave a crowd round us in a minute," ses Peter. "Mind you don't bust a blood-vessel, Sam."

"And be locked up for stealing it, p'r'aps," ses Ginger. "Better let it go, Sam."

"Wot, arter refusing five bob for it?" ses Sam. "Talk sense, Ginger, and give it a shove be'ind."

Ginger gave it a shove, but it was no good. There was three or four people coming along the road, and Sam made up 'is mind in an instant, and 'eld up his 'and to a cab that was passing.

It took the three of 'em to get the dog into the cab, and as soon as it was in the cabman told 'em to take it out agin. They argufied with 'im till their tongues ached, and at last, arter paying 'im four shillings and sixpence afore they started, he climbed up on the box and drove off.

The Understudy

The door was open when they got to their lodgings, but they 'ad to be careful because o' the landlady. It took the three of 'em to pull and push that dog upstairs, and Ginger took a dislike to dogs that 'e never really got over. They got 'im in the bedroom at last, and, arter they 'ad given 'im a drink o' water out o' the wash-hand basin, Ginger and Peter started to find fault with Sam Small.

"I know wot I'm about," ses Sam; "but, o' course, if you don't want your share, say so. Wot?"

"Talk sense!" ses Ginger. "We paid our share o' the cab, didn't we? And more fools us."

"There won't be no share," ses Peter Russet; "but if there is, we're going to 'ave it."

They undressed themselves and got into bed, and Ginger 'adn't been in his five minutes afore the dog started to get in with 'im. When Ginger pushed 'im off 'e seemed to think he was having a game with 'im, and, arter pretending to bite 'im in play, he took

The Understudy

the end of the counterpane in 'is mouth and tried to drag it off.

"Why don't you get to sleep, Ginger?" ses Sam, who was just dropping off. "'Ave a game with 'im in the morning."

Ginger gave the dog a punch in the chest, and, arter saying a few o' the things he'd like to do to Sam Small, he cuddled down in 'is bed and they all went off to sleep. All but the dog, that is. He seemed uneasy in 'is mind, and if 'e woke 'em up once by standing on his 'ind-legs and putting his fore-paws on their chest to see if they was still alive, he did arf-a-dozen times.

He dropped off to sleep at last, scratching 'imself, but about three o'clock in the morning Ginger woke up with a 'orrible start and sat up in bed shivering. Sam and Peter woke up, too, and, raising themselves in bed, looked at the dog, wot was sitting on its tail, with its 'ead back, moaning fit to break its 'art.

"Wot's the matter?" ses old Sam, in a shaky voice. "Stop it! Stop it, d'ye hear!"

The Understudy

"P'r'aps it's dying," ses Ginger, as the dog let off a 'owl like a steamer coming up the river. "Stop it, you brute!"

"He'll wake the 'ouse up in a minute," ses Peter. "Take 'im downstairs and kick 'im into the street, Sam."

"Take 'im yourself," ses Sam. "*Hsh!* Somebody's coming upstairs. Poor old doggie. Come along, then. Come along."

The dog left off his 'owling, and went over and licked 'im just as the landlady and one or two more came to the door and called out to know wot they meant by it.

"It's all right, missis," ses Sam. "It's on'y pore Ginger. You keep quiet," he ses in a whisper, turning to Ginger.

"Wot's he making that row about?" ses the landlady. "He made my blood run cold."

"He's got a touch o' toothache," ses Sam. "Never mind, Ginger," 'e ses in a hurry, as the dog let off another 'owl; "try and bear it."

"He's a coward, that's wot 'e is," ses the

The Understudy

landlady, very fierce. "Why, a child o' five wouldn't make such a fuss."

"Sounds more like a dog than a 'uman being," ses another voice. "You come outside, Ginger, and I'll give you something to cry for."

They waited a minute or two, and then, everything being quiet, they went back to bed, while old Sam talked to Ginger about wot 'e called 'is "presence o' mind," and Ginger talked to 'im about wot he'd do to 'im if 'e wasn't a fat old man with one foot in the grave.

They was all in a better temper when they woke up in the morning, and while Sam was washing they talked about wot they was to do with the dog.

"We can't lead 'im about all day," ses Ginger; "and if we let 'im off the string he'll go off 'ome."

"He don't know where his 'ome is," ses Sam, very severe; "but he might run away, and then the pore thing might be starved or

The Understudy

else ill-treated. I 'ave 'eard o' boys tying tin cans to their tails."

"I've done it myself," ses Ginger, nodding.

"Consequently it's our dooty to look arter 'im," ses Sam.

"I'll go down to the front door," ses Peter, "and when I whistle, bring him down."

Ginger stuck his 'ead out o' the window, and by and by, when Peter whistled, him and Sam took the dog downstairs and out into the street.

"So far so good," ses Sam; "now, wot about brekfuss?"

They 'ad their brekfuss in their usual coffee-shop, and the dog took bits from all of them. Unfortunately, 'e wasn't used to haddick bones, and arter two of the customers 'ad gorn out and two more 'ad complained to the landlord, they 'ad to leave their brekfusses and take 'im outside for a breath o' fresh air.

"Now, wot are we going to do?" ses Ginger. "I'm beginning to be sick of the

The Understudy

sight of 'im. 'Ave we got to lead 'im about all day on a bit o' string?"

"Let's take 'im round the corner and lose 'im," ses Peter Russet.

"You give me 'old o' that string," ses Sam. "If you don't want shares, that's all right. If I'm going to look arter 'im I'll 'ave it all."

That made Ginger and Peter look at each other. Direckly Sam began to talk about money they began to think they might be losing something.

"And wot about 'aving 'im in our bedroom and keeping us awake all night?" ses Peter.

"And putting it on to me with the toothache," ses Ginger. "No; you can look arter 'im, Sam, while me and Peter goes off and enjoys ourselves; and if you get anything we go shares, mind."

"All right," ses Sam, turning away with the dog.

"And suppose Sam gets a reward or sells

The Understudy

it, and then tells us that it ran away and 'e lost it?" ses Peter.

"O' course; I never thought o' that," ses Ginger. "You've got your 'ead on straight, Peter."

"I see 'im smile, that's why," ses Peter Russet.

"You're a liar," ses Sam.

"We'll stick together," ses Ginger. "Least-ways, one of us'll keep with you, Sam."

They settled it that way at last, and while Ginger went for a walk down round about where they 'ad found the dog, Sam Small and Peter waited for him in a little public-'ouse down Limehouse way. Their idea was that there would be bills up, and when Ginger came back and said there wasn't, they 'ad a lot to say about people wot wasn't fit to 'ave dogs because they didn't love 'em.

They 'ad a miserable day. When the dog got sick o' sitting in a pub 'e made such a noise they 'ad to take 'im out; and when 'e got tired o' walking about he sat down on the

The Understudy

pavement and they 'ad to drag 'im along to the nearest pub agin. At five o'clock in the arternoon Ginger Dick was talking about two-penn'orth o' rat-poison.

"Wot are we to do with 'im till twelve o'clock to-night?" ses Peter.

"And s'pose we can't smuggle 'im into the 'ouse agin?" ses Ginger. "Or suppose he makes that noise agin in the night?"

They 'ad a pint each to 'elp them to think wot was to be done. And, arter a lot o' talking and quarrelling, they did wot a lot of other people 'ave done when they got into trouble: they came to me.

I 'ad on'y been on dooty about arf an hour when the three of 'em turned up at the wharf with the dog, and, arter saying 'ow well I looked and that I seemed to get younger every time they saw me, they asked me to take charge of the dog for 'em.

"It'll be company for you," ses old Sam. "It must be very lonely 'ere of a night. I've often thought of it."

The Understudy

“And of a day-time you could take it ’ome and tie it up in your back-yard,” ses Ginger.

I wouldn’t ’ave anything to do with it at fust, but at last I gave way. They offered me fourpence a day for its keep, and, as I didn’t want to run any risk, I made ’em give me a couple o’ bob to go on with.

They went off as though they’d left a load o’ care be’ind ’em, and arter tying the dog up to a crane I went on with my work. They ’adn’t told me wot the game was, but, from one or two things they’d let drop, I’d got a pretty good idea.

The dog ’owled a bit at fust, but he quieted down arter a bit. He was a nice-looking animal, but one dog is much the same as another to me, and if I ’ad one ten years I don’t suppose I could pick it out from two or three others.

I took it off ’ome with me when I left at six o’clock next morning, and tied it up in my yard. My missis ’ad words about it, o’ course—that’s wot people get married for—

The Understudy

but when she found it woke me up three times she quieted down and said wot a nice coat it 'ad got.

The three of 'em came round next evening to see it, and they was so afraid of its being lost that when they stood me a pint at the Bull's Head we 'ad to take it with us. Ginger was going to buy a sausage-roll for it, but, arter Sam 'ad pointed out that they was paying me fourpence a day for its keep, he didn't. And Sam 'ad the cheek to tell me that it liked a nice bit o' fried steak as well as anything.

A lot o' people admired that dog. I remember, on the fourth night I think it was, the barge *Dauntless* came alongside, and arter she was made fast the skipper came ashore and took a little notice of it.

"Where did you get 'im?" he ses.

I told 'im 'ow it was, and he stood there for some time patting the dog on the 'ead and whistling under 'is breath.

"It's much the same size as my dog," he ses; "that's a black retriever, too."

The Understudy

I ses "Oh!"

"I'm afraid I shall 'ave to get rid of it," he ses. "It's on the barge now. My missis won't 'ave it in the 'ouse any more cos it bit the baby. And o' course it was no good p'inting out to 'er that it was its first bite. Even the law allows one bite, but it's no good talking about the law to wimmen."

"Except when it's on their side," I ses.

He patted the dog's 'ead agin and whistled, and a big black dog came up out of the cabin and sprang ashore. It went up and put its nose to Sam's dog, and they both growled like thunderstorms.

"Might be brothers," ses the skipper, "on'y your dog's got a better 'ead and a better coat. It's a good dog."

"They're all alike to me," I ses. "I couldn't tell 'em apart, not if you paid me."

The skipper stood there a moment, and then he ses: "I wish you'd let me see 'ow my dog looks in your dog's collar," he ses.

"Whaffor?" I ses.

The Understudy

"On'y fancy," he ses. "Oh, Bill!"

"Yes," I ses.

"It ain't Christmas," he ses, taking my arm and walking up and down a bit, "but it will be soon, and then I mightn't see you. You've done me one or two good turns, and I should like to make you a Christmas-box of three 'arf-dollars."

I let 'im give 'em to me, and then, just to please 'im, I let 'im try the collar on 'is dog, while I swept up a bit.

"It looked beautiful on 'im," he ses, when I'd finished; "but I've put it back agin. Come on, Bruno. Good-night, Bill."

He got 'is dog on the barge agin arter a bit o' trouble, and arter making sure that my dog 'ad got its own collar on I went on with my work.

The dog didn't seem to be quite 'imself next day, and he was so fierce in the yard that my missis was afraid to go near 'im. I was going to ask the skipper about it, as 'e seemed to know more about dogs than I did, but

The Understudy

when I got to the wharf the barge had sailed.

It was just getting dark when there came a ring at the gate-bell, and afore I could answer it arf-a-dozen more, as fast as the bell could go. And when I opened the wicket Sam Small and Ginger and Peter Russet all tried to get in at once.

“Where’s the dog?” ses Sam.

“Tied up,” I ses. “Wot’s the matter? ’Ave you all gorn mad?”

They didn’t answer me. They ran on to the jetty, and afore I could turn round a’most they ’ad got the dog loose and was dragging it towards me, smiling all over their faces.

“Reward,” ses Ginger, as I caught ’old of ’im by the coat. “Five pounds—landlord of a pub—at Bow—come on, Sam!”

“Why don’t you keep your mouth shut, Ginger?” ses Sam.

“Five pounds!” I ses. “Five pounds! Hurrah!”



“I’d pretty well swear he ain’t the same dog”

The Understudy

“Wot are you hurrying about?” ses Sam, very short.

“Why,” I ses, “I s’pose—— Here, arf a moment!”

“Can’t stop,” ses Sam, going arter the others.

I watched ’em up the road, and then I locked the gate and walked up and down the wharf thinking wot a funny thing money is, and ’ow it alters people’s natures. And arter all, I thought that three arf-dollars earned honest was better than a reward for hiding another man’s dog.

I finished tidying up, and at nine o’clock I went into the office for a quiet smoke. I couldn’t ’elp wondering ’ow them three ’ad got on, and just as I was thinking about it there came the worst ringing at the gate-bell I ’ave ever ’eard in my life, and the noise of heavy boots kicking the gate. It was so violent I ’ardly liked to go at fust, thinking it might be bad news, but I opened it at last, and in bust Sam Small, with Ginger and Peter.

The Understudy

For five minutes they all talked at once, with their nasty fists 'eld under my nose. I couldn't make 'ead or tail of it at fust, and then I found as 'ow they 'ad got the dog back with them, and that the landlord 'ad said 'e wasn't the one.

"But 'e said as he thought the collar was his," ses Sam. "'Ow do you account for that?"

"P'r'aps he made a mistake," I ses; "or p'r'aps he thought you'd turn the dog adrift and he'd get it back for nothing. You know wot landlords are. Try 'im agin."

"I'd pretty well swear he ain't the same dog," ses Peter Russet, looking in a puzzled way at Sam and Ginger.

"You take 'im back to-morrow night," I ses. "It's a nice walk to Bow. And then come back and beg my pardon. I want to 'ave a word with this policeman here. Good-night."

THE WEAKER VESSEL



The Weaker Vessel

MR. GRIBBLE sat in his small front parlour in a state of angry amazement. It was half-past six and there was no Mrs. Gribble; worse still, there was no tea. It was a state of things that had only happened once before. That was three weeks after marriage, and on that occasion Mr. Gribble had put his foot down with a bang that had echoed down the corridors of thirty years.

The fire in the little kitchen was out, and the untidy remains of Mrs. Gribble's midday meal still disgraced the table. More and more dazed, the indignant husband could only come to the conclusion that she had gone out and been run over. Other things might possibly account for her behaviour; that was the only one that would excuse it.

The Weaker Vessel

His meditations were interrupted by the sound of a key in the front door, and a second later a small, anxious figure entered the room and, leaning against the table, strove to get its breath. The process was not helped by the alarming distension of Mr. Gribble's figure.

"I—I got home—quick as I could—Henry," said Mrs. Gribble, panting.

"Where is my tea?" demanded her husband. "What do you mean by it? The fire's out and the kitchen is just as you left it."

"I—I've been to a lawyer's, Henry," said Mrs. Gribble, "and I had to wait."

"Lawyer's?" repeated her husband.

"I got a letter this afternoon telling me to call. Poor Uncle George, that went to America, is gone."

"That is no excuse for neglecting me," said Mr. Gribble. "Of course people die when they are old. Is that the one that got on and made money?"

His wife, apparently struggling to repress

The Weaker Vessel

a little excitement, nodded. "He—he's left me two hundred pounds a year for life, Henry," she said, dabbing at her pale blue eyes with a handkerchief. "They're going to pay it monthly; sixteen pounds thirteen shillings and fourpence a month. That's how he left it."

"Two hund——" began Mr. Gribble, forgetting himself. "*Two hun*—— Go and get my tea! If you think you're going to give yourself airs because your uncle's left you money, you won't do it in my house."

He took a chair by the window, and, while his wife busied herself in the kitchen, sat gazing in blank delight at the little street. Two hundred a year! It was all he could do to resume his wonted expression as his wife re-entered the room and began to lay the table. His manner, however, when she let a cup and saucer slip from her trembling fingers to smash on the floor left nothing to be desired.

"It's nice to have money come to us in our

The Weaker Vessel

old age," said Mrs. Gribble, timidly, as they sat at tea. "It takes a load off my mind."

"Old age!" said her husband, disagreeably. "What d'ye mean by old age? I'm fifty-two, and feel as young as ever I did."

"You look as young as ever you did," said the docile Mrs. Gribble. "I can't see no change in you. At least, not to speak of."

"Not so much talk," said her husband. "When I want your opinion of my looks I'll ask you for it. When do you start getting this money?"

"Tuesday week; first of May," replied his wife. "The lawyers are going to send it by registered letter."

Mr. Gribble grunted.

"I shall be sorry to leave the house for some things," said his wife, looking round. "We've been here a good many years now, Henry."

"Leave the house!" repeated Mr. Gribble, putting down his tea-cup and staring at her.

The Weaker Vessel

"Leave the house! What are you talking about?"

"But we can't stay here, Henry," faltered Mrs. Gribble. "Not with all that money. They are building some beautiful houses in Charlton Grove now—bathroom, tiled hearths, and beautiful stained glass in the front door; and all for twenty-eight pounds a year."

"Wonderful!" said the other, with a mocking glint in his eye.

"And iron palings to the front garden, painted chocolate-colour picked out with blue," continued his wife, eyeing him wistfully.

Mr. Gribble struck the table a blow with his fist. "This house is good enough for me," he roared; "and what's good enough for me is good enough for you. You want to waste money on show; that's what you want. Stained glass and bow-windows! You want a bow-window to loll about in, do you? Shouldn't wonder if you don't want a servant-gal to do the work."

The Weaker Vessel

Mrs. Gribble flushed guiltily, and caught her breath.

“We’re going to live as we’ve always lived,” pursued Mr. Gribble. “Money ain’t going to spoil me. I ain’t going to put on no side just because I’ve come in for a little bit. If you had your way we should end up in the workhouse.”

He filled his pipe and smoked thoughtfully, while Mrs. Gribble cleared away the tea-things and washed up. Pictures, good to look upon, formed in the smoke—pictures of a hale, hearty man walking along the primrose path arm-in-arm with two hundred a year; of the mahogany and plush of the saloon bar at the Grafton Arms; of Sunday jaunts, and the Oval on summer afternoons.

He ate his breakfast slowly on the first of the month, and, the meal finished, took a seat in the window with his pipe and waited for the postman. Mrs. Gribble’s timid reminders concerning the flight of time and consequent fines for lateness at work fell on

The Weaker Vessel

deaf ears. He jumped up suddenly and met the postman at the door.

"Has it come?" inquired Mrs. Gribble, extending her hand.

By way of reply her husband tore open the envelope and, handing her the covering letter, counted the notes and coin and placed them slowly in his pockets. Then, as Mrs. Gribble looked at him, he looked at the clock, and, snatching up his hat, set off down the road.

He was late home that evening, and his manner forbade conversation. Mrs. Gribble, with the bereaved air of one who has sustained an irremediable loss, sighed fitfully, and once applied her handkerchief to her eyes.

"That's no good," said her husband at last; "that won't bring him back."

"Bring who back?" inquired Mrs. Gribble, in genuine surprise.

"Why, your Uncle George," said Mr. Gribble. "That's what you're turning on the water-cart for, ain't it?"

The Weaker Vessel

"I wasn't thinking of him," said Mrs. Gribble, trying to speak bravely. "I was thinking of——"

"Well, you ought to be," interrupted her husband. "He wasn't my uncle, poor chap, but I've been thinking of him, off and on, all day. That bloater-paste you are eating now came from his kindness. I brought it home as a treat."

"I was thinking of my clothes," said Mrs. Gribble, clenching her hands together under the table. "When I found I had come in for that money, the first thing I thought was that I should be able to have a decent dress. My old ones are quite worn out, and as for my hat and jacket——"

"Go on," said her husband, fiercely. "Go on. That's just what I said: trust you with money, and we should be poorer than ever."

"I'm ashamed to be seen out," said Mrs. Gribble.

"A woman's place is the home," said Mr. Gribble; "and so long as I'm satisfied with

The Weaker Vessel

your appearance nobody else matters. So long as I am pleased, that's everything. What do you want to go dressing yourself up for? Nothing looks worse than an over-dressed woman."

"What are we going to do with all that money, then?" inquired Mrs. Gribble, in trembling tones.

"That'll do," said Mr. Gribble, decidedly. "That'll do. One o' these days you'll go too far. You start throwing that money in my teeth and see what happens. I've done my best for you all these years, and there's no reason to suppose I sha'n't go on doing so. What did you say? What!"

Mrs. Gribble turned to him a face rendered ghastly by terror. "I—I said—it was my money," she stammered.

Mr. Gribble rose, and stood for a full minute regarding her. Then, kicking a chair out of his way, he took his hat from its peg in the passage and, with a bang of the street-door that sent a current of fresh, sweet air circulating

The Weaker Vessel

through the house, strode off to the Grafton Arms.

It was past eleven when he returned, but even the spectacle of his wife laboriously darning her old dress failed to reduce his good-humour in the slightest degree. In a frivolous mood he even took a feather from the dismembered hat on the table and stuck it in his hair. He took the stump of a strong cigar from his lips and, exhaling a final cloud of smoke, tossed it into the fireplace.

"Uncle George dead," he said, at last, shaking his head. "Hadn't pleasure acquaintance, but good man. Good man."

He shook his head again and gazed mistily at his wife.

"He was a teetotaller," she remarked, casually.

"He was tee-toller," repeated Mr. Gribble, regarding her equably. "Good man. Uncle George dead—tee-toller."

Mrs. Gribble gathered up her work and began to put it away.

The Weaker Vessel

"Bed-time," said Mr. Gribble, and led the way upstairs, singing.

His good-humour had evaporated by the morning, and, having made a light breakfast of five cups of tea, he went off, with lagging steps, to work. It was a beautiful spring morning, and the idea of a man with two hundred a year and a headache going off to a warehouse instead of a day's outing seemed to border upon the absurd. What use was money without freedom? His toil was sweetened that day by the knowledge that he could drop it any time he liked and walk out, a free man, into the sunlight.

By the end of a week his mind was made up. Each day that passed made his hurried uprising and scrambled breakfast more and more irksome; and on Monday morning, with hands in trouser-pockets and legs stretched out, he leaned back in his chair and received his wife's alarming intimations as to the flight of time with a superior and sphinx-like smile.

"It's too fine to go to work to-day," he

The Weaker Vessel

said, lazily. "Come to that, any day is too fine to waste at work."

Mrs. Gribble sat gasping at him.

"So on Saturday I gave 'em a week's notice," continued her husband, "and after Potts and Co. had listened while I told 'em what I thought of 'em, they said they'd do without the week's notice."

"You've never given up your job?" said Mrs. Gribble.

"I spoke to old Potts as one gentleman of independent means to another," said Mr. Gribble, smiling. "Thirty-five bob a week after twenty years' service! And he had the cheek to tell me I wasn't worth that. When I told him what he was worth he talked about sending for the police. What are you looking like that for? I've worked hard for you for thirty years, and I've had enough of it. Now it's your turn."

"You'd find it hard to get another place at your age," said his wife; "especially if they wouldn't give you a good character."

The Weaker Vessel

"Place!" said the other, staring. "Place! I tell you I've done with work. For a man o' my means to go on working for thirty-five bob a week is ridiculous."

"But suppose anything happened to me," said his wife, in a troubled voice.

"That's not very likely," said Mr. Gribble. "You're tough enough. And if it did your money would come to me."

Mrs. Gribble shook her head.

"WHAT?" roared her husband, jumping up.

"I've only got it for life, Henry, as I told you," said Mrs. Gribble, in alarm. "I thought you knew it would stop when I died."

"And what's to become of me if anything happens to you, then?" demanded the dismayed Mr. Gribble. "What am I to do?"

Mrs. Gribble put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"And don't start weakening your constitution by crying," shouted the incensed husband.

"What are you mumbling?"

"I sa—sa—said, let's hope—you'll go—

The Weaker Vessel

first," sobbed his wife. "Then it will be all right."

Mr. Gribble opened his mouth, and then, realizing the inadequacy of the English language for moments of stress, closed it again. He broke his silence at last in favour of Uncle George.

"Mind you," he said, concluding a peroration which his wife listened to with her fingers in her ears—"mind you, I reckon I've been absolutely done by you and your precious Uncle George. I've given up a good situation, and now, any time you fancy to go off the hooks, I'm to be turned into the street."

"I'll try and live, for your sake, Henry," said his wife.

"Think of my worry every time you are ill," pursued the indignant Mr. Gribble.

Mrs. Gribble sighed, and her husband, after a few further remarks concerning Uncle George, his past and his future, announced his intention of going to the lawyers and seeing whether anything could be done. He came back in a

The Weaker Vessel

state of voiceless gloom, and spent the rest of a beautiful day indoors, smoking a pipe which had lost much of its flavour, and regarding with a critical and anxious eye the small, weedy figure of his wife as she went about her work.

The second month's payment went into his pocket as a matter of course, but on this occasion Mrs. Gribble made no requests for new clothes or change of residence. A little nervous cough was her sole comment.

"Got a cold?" inquired her husband, starting.

"I don't think so," replied his wife, and, surprised and touched at this unusual display of interest, coughed again.

"Is it your throat or your chest?" he inquired, gruffly.

Mrs. Gribble coughed again to see. After five coughs she said she thought it was her chest.

"You'd better not go out o' doors to-day, then," said Mr. Gribble. "Don't stand about in draughts; and I'll fetch you in a bottle of

The Weaker Vessel

cough mixture when I go out. What about a lay-down on the sofa?"

His wife thanked him, and, reaching the sofa, watched with half-closed eyes as he cleared the breakfast-table. It was the first time he had done such a thing in his life, and a little honest pride in the possession of such a cough would not be denied. Dim possibilities of its vast usefulness suddenly occurred to her.

She took the cough mixture for a week, by which time other symptoms, extremely disquieting to an ease-loving man, had manifested themselves. Going upstairs deprived her of breath; carrying a loaded tea-tray produced a long and alarming stitch in the side. The last time she ever filled the coal-scuttle she was discovered sitting beside it on the floor in a state of collapse.

"You'd better go and see the doctor," said Mr. Gribble.

Mrs. Gribble went. Years before the doctor had told her that she ought to take life easier,

The Weaker Vessel

and she was now able to tell him she was prepared to take his advice.

"And, you see, I must take care of myself now for the sake of my husband," she said, after she had explained matters.

"I understand," said the doctor.

"If anything happened to me——" began the patient.

"Nothing shall happen," said the other. "Stay in bed to-morrow morning, and I'll come round and overhaul you."

Mrs. Gribble hesitated. "You might examine me and think I was all right," she objected; "and at the same time you wouldn't know how I feel."

"I know just how you feel," was the reply. "Good-bye."

He came round the following morning and, following the dejected Mr. Gribble upstairs, made a long and thorough investigation of his patient.

"Say 'ninety-nine,'" he said, adjusting his stethoscope.

The Weaker Vessel

Mrs. Gribble ticked off "ninety-nines" until her husband's ears ached with them. The doctor finished at last, and, fastening his bag, stood with his beard in his hand, pondering. He looked from the little, white-faced woman on the bed to the bulky figure of Mr. Gribble.

"You had better lie up for a week," he said, decidedly. "The rest will do you good."

"Nothing serious, I s'pose?" said Mr. Gribble, as he led the way downstairs to the small parlour.

"She ought to be all right with care," was the reply.

"Care?" repeated the other, distastefully. "What's the matter with her?"

"She's not very strong," said the doctor; "and hearts don't improve with age, you know. Under favourable conditions she's good for some years yet. The great thing is never to thwart her. Let her have her own way in everything."

The Weaker Vessel

“Own way in everything?” repeated the dumbfounded Mr. Gribble.

The doctor nodded. “Never let her worry about anything,” he continued; “and, above all, never find fault with her.”

“Not,” said Mr. Gribble, thickly—“not even for her own good?”

“Unless you want to run the risk of losing her.”

Mr. Gribble shivered.

“Let her have an easy time,” said the doctor, taking up his hat. “Pamper her a bit if you like; it won’t hurt her. Above all, don’t let that heart of hers get excited.”

He shook hands with the petrified Mr. Gribble and went off, grinning wickedly. He had few favourites, and Mr. Gribble was not one of them.

For two days the devoted husband did the housework and waited on the invalid. Then he wearied, and, at his wife’s suggestion, a small girl was engaged as servant. She did most of the nursing as well, and, having a

The Weaker Vessel

great love for the sensational, took a grave view of her mistress's condition.

It was a relief to Mr. Gribble when his wife came downstairs again, and he was cheered to see that she looked much better. His satisfaction was so marked that it brought on her cough again.

"It's this house, I think," she said, with a resigned smile. "It never did agree with me."

"Well, you've lived in it a good many years," said her husband, controlling himself with difficulty.

"It's rather dark and small," said Mrs. Gribble. "Not but what it is good enough for me. And I dare say it will last my time."

"Nonsense!" said her husband, gruffly. "You want to get out a bit more. You've got nothing to do now we are wasting all this money on a servant. Why don't you go out for little walks?"

Mrs. Gribble went, after several promptings, and the fruit of one of them was handed by

The Weaker Vessel

the postman to Mr. Gribble a few days afterwards. Half-choking with wrath and astonishment, he stood over his trembling wife with the first draper's bill he had ever received.

"One pound two shillings and threepence three-farthings!" he recited. "It must be a mistake. It must be for somebody else."

Mrs. Gribble, with her hand to her heart, tottered to the sofa and lay there with her eyes closed.

"I had to get some dress material," she said, in a quavering voice. "You want me to go out, and I'm so shabby I'm ashamed to be seen."

Mr. Gribble made muffled noises in his throat; then, afraid to trust himself, he went into the back-yard and, taking a seat on an upturned bucket, sat with his head in his hands peering into the future.

The dressmaker's bill and a bill for a new hat came after the next monthly payment; and a bill for shoes came a week later. Hoping much from the well-known curative effects of

The Weaker Vessel

fine feathers, he managed to treat the affair with dignified silence. The only time he allowed full play to his feelings Mrs. Gribble took to her bed for two days, and the doctor had a heart-to-heart talk with him on the doorstep.

It was a matter of great annoyance to him that his wife still continued to attribute her ill-health to the smallness and darkness of the house; and the fact that there were only two of the houses in Charlton Grove left caused a marked depression of spirits. It was clear that she was fretting. The small servant went further, and said that she was fading away.

They moved at the September quarter, and a slight, but temporary, improvement in Mrs. Gribble's health took place. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkled over new curtains and new linoleum. The tiled hearths, and stained glass in the front door filled her with a deep and solemn thankfulness. The only thing that disturbed her was the fact that Mr. Gribble, to avoid wasting money over necessities, con-

The Weaker Vessel

trived to spend an unduly large portion on personal luxuries.

"We ought to have some new things for the kitchen," she said one day.

"No money," said Mr. Gribble, laconically.

"And a mat for the bathroom."

Mr. Gribble got up and went out.

She had to go to him for everything. Two hundred a year and not a penny she could call her own! She consulted her heart, and that faithful organ responded with a bound that set her nerves quivering. If she could only screw her courage to the sticking-point the question would be settled for once and all.

White and trembling she sat at breakfast on the first of November, waiting for the postman, while the unconscious Mr. Gribble went on with his meal. The double-knocks down the road came nearer and nearer, and Mr. Gribble, wiping his mouth, sat upright with an air of alert and pleased interest. Rapid steps came to the front door, and a double bang followed.

The Weaker Vessel

“Always punctual,” said Mr. Gribble, good-humouredly.

His wife made no reply, but, taking a blue-crossed envelope from the maid in her shaking fingers, looked round for a knife. Her gaze encountered Mr. Gribble’s outstretched hand.

“After you,” he said sharply.

Mrs. Gribble found the knife, and, hacking tremulously at the envelope, peeped inside it and, with her gaze fastened on the window, fumbled for her pocket. She was so pale and shook so much that the words died away on her husband’s lips.

“You—you had better let me take care of that,” he said, at last.

“It is—all right,” gasped his wife.

She put her hand to her throat and, hardly able to believe in her victory, sat struggling for breath. Before her, grim and upright, her husband sat, a figure of helpless smouldering wrath.

“You might lose it,” he said, at last.

“I sha’n’t lose it,” said his wife.



“You — you had better let me take care of that”

The Weaker Vessel

To avoid further argument, she arose and went slowly upstairs. Through the doorway Mr. Gribble saw her helping herself up by the banisters, her left hand still at her throat. Then he heard her moving slowly about in the bedroom overhead.

He took out his pipe and filled it mechanically, and was just holding a match to the tobacco when he paused and gazed with a puzzled air at the ceiling. "Blamed if it don't sound like somebody dancing!" he growled.

STEPPING BACKWARDS

Stepping Backwards

“**W**ONDERFUL improvement,” said Mr. Jack Mills. “Show ’em to me again.”

Mr. Simpson took his pipe from his mouth and, parting his lips, revealed his new teeth.

“And you talk better,” said Mr. Mills, taking his glass from the counter and emptying it; “you ain’t got that silly lisp you used to have. What does your missis think of ’em?”

“She hasn’t seen ’em yet,” said the other. “I had ’em put in at dinner-time. I ate my dinner with ’em.”

Mr. Mills expressed his admiration. “If it wasn’t for your white hair and whiskers you’d look thirty again,” he said, slowly. “How old are you?”

“Fifty-three,” said his friend. “If it wasn’t

Stepping Backwards

for being laughed at I've often thought of having my whiskers shaved off and my hair dyed black. People think I'm sixty."

"Or seventy," continued Mr. Mills. "What does it matter, people laughing? You've got a splendid head of 'air, and it would dye beautiful."

Mr. Simpson shook his head and, ordering a couple of glasses of bitter, attacked his in silence.

"It might be done gradual," he said, after a long interval. "It don't do anybody good at the warehouse to look old."

"Make a clean job of it," counselled Mr. Mills, who was very fond of a little cheap excitement. "Get it over and done with. You've got good features, and you'd look splendid clean-shaved."

Mr. Simpson smiled faintly.

"Only on Wednesday the barmaid here was asking after you," pursued Mr. Mills.

Mr. Simpson smiled again.

"She says to me, 'Where's Gran'pa?' she

Stepping Backwards

says, and when I says, haughty like, 'Who do you mean?' she says, 'Father Christmas!' If you was to tell her that you are only fifty-three, she'd laugh in your face."

"Let her laugh," said the other, sourly.

"Come out and get it off," said Mr. Mills, earnestly. "There's a barber's in Bird Street; you could go in the little back room, where he charges a penny more, and get it done without anybody being a bit the wiser."

He put his hand on Mr. Simpson's shoulder, and that gentleman, with a glare in the direction of the fair but unconscious offender, rose in a hypnotized fashion and followed him out. Twice on the way to Bird Street Mr. Simpson paused and said he had altered his mind, and twice did the propulsion of Mr. Mills's right hand, and his flattering argument, make him alter it again.

It was a matter of relief to Mr. Simpson that the barber took his instructions without any show of surprise. It appeared, indeed, that an elderly man of seventy-eight had

Stepping Backwards

enlisted his services for a similar purpose not two months before, and had got married six weeks afterwards. Age of the bride given as twenty-four, but said to have looked older.

A snip of the scissors, and six inches of white beard fell to the floor. For the first time in thirty years Mr. Simpson felt a razor on his face. Then his hair was cut and shampooed; and an hour later he sat gazing at a dark-haired, clean-shaven man in the glass who gazed back at him with wondering eyes—a lean-jawed, good-looking man, who, in a favourable light, might pass for forty. He turned and met the admiring eyes of Mr. Mills.

“What did I tell you?” inquired the latter. “You look young enough to be your own son.”

“Or grandson,” said the barber, with professional pride.

Mr. Simpson got up slowly from the chair and, accompanied by the admiring Mr. Mills,

Stepping Backwards

passed out into the street. The evening was young, and, at his friend's suggestion, they returned to the Plume of Feathers.

"You give the order," said Mr. Mills, "and see whether she recognizes you."

Mr. Simpson obeyed.

"Don't you know him?" inquired Mr. Mills, as the barmaid turned away.

"I don't think I have that pleasure," said the girl, simpering.

"Gran'pa's eldest boy," said Mr. Mills.

"Oh!" said the girl. "Well, I hope he's a better man than his father, then?"

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Mr. Simpson, painfully conscious of his friend's regards.

"Nothing," said the girl, "nothing. Only we can all be better, can't we? He's a nice old gentleman; so simple."

"Don't know you from Adam," said Mr. Mills, as she turned away. "Now, if you ask me, I don't believe as your own missis will recognize you."

Stepping Backwards

"Rubbish," said Mr. Simpson. "My wife would know me anywhere. We've been married over thirty years. Thirty years of sunshine and shadow together. You're a single man, and don't understand these things."

"P'r'aps you're right," said his friend. "But it'll be a bit of a shock to her, anyway. What do you say to me stepping round and breaking the news to her? It's a bit sudden, you know. She's expecting a white-haired old gentleman, not a black-haired boy."

Mr. Simpson looked a bit uneasy. "P'r'aps I ought to have told her first," he murmured, craning his neck to look in the glass at the back of the bar.

"I'll go and put it right for you," said his friend. "You stay here and smoke your pipe."

He stepped out briskly, but his pace slackened as he drew near the house.

"I—I—came—to see you about your husband," he faltered, as Mrs. Simpson opened the door and stood regarding him.

Stepping Backwards

"What's the matter?" she exclaimed, with a faint cry. "What's happened to him?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Mills, hastily. "Nothing serious, that is. I just came round to warn you so that you will be able to know it's him."

Mrs. Simpson let off a shriek that set his ears tingling. Then, steadying herself by the wall, she tottered into the front room, followed by the discomfited Mr. Mills, and sank into a chair.

"He's dead!" she sobbed. "He's dead!"

"He is not," said Mr. Mills.

"Is he much hurt? Is he dying?" gasped Mrs. Simpson.

"Only his hair," said Mr. Mills, clutching at the opening. "He is not hurt at all."

Mrs. Simpson dabbed at her eyes and sat regarding him in bewilderment. Her twin chins were still quivering with emotion, but her eyes were beginning to harden. "What are you talking about?" she inquired, in a raspy voice.

Stepping Backwards

"He's been to a hairdresser's," said Mr. Mills. "He's 'ad all his white whiskers cut off, and his hair cut short and dyed black. And, what with that and his new teeth, I thought—he thought—p'r'aps you mightn't know him when he came home."

"Dyed?" cried Mrs. Simpson, starting to her feet.

Mr. Mills nodded. "He looks twenty years younger," he said, with a smile. "He'd pass for his own son anywhere."

Mrs. Simpson's eyes snapped. "Perhaps he'd pass for *my* son," she remarked.

"Yes, easy," said the tactful Mr. Mills. "You can't think what a difference it's made to him. That's why I came to see you—so you shouldn't be startled."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Simpson. "I'm much obliged. But you might have spared yourself the trouble. I should know my husband anywhere."

"Ah, that's what you think," retorted Mr. Mills, with a smile; "but the barmaid at the

Stepping Backwards

Plume didn't. That's what made me come to you."

Mrs. Simpson gazed at him.

"I says to myself," continued Mr. Mills, "If *she* don't know him, I'm certain his missis won't, and I'd better——"

"You'd better go," interrupted his hostess.

Mr. Mills started, and then, with much dignity, stalked after her to the door.

"As to your story, I don't believe a word of it," said Mrs. Simpson. "Whatever else my husband is, he isn't a fool, and he'd no more think of cutting off his whiskers and dyeing his hair than you would of telling the truth."

"Seeing is believing," said the offended Mr. Mills, darkly.

"I'll wait till I do see, and then I sha'n't believe," was the reply. "It is a put-up job between you and some other precious idiot, I expect. But you can't deceive me. If your black-haired friend comes here, he'll get it, I can tell you."

Stepping Backwards

She slammed the door on his protests and, returning to the parlour, gazed fiercely into the glass on the mantelpiece. It reflected sixteen stone of honest English womanhood, a thin wisp of yellowish-grey hair, and a pair of faded eyes peering through clumsy spectacles.

"Son, indeed!" she said, her lips quivering. "You wait till you come home, my lord!"

Mr. Simpson, with some forebodings, returned home an hour later. To a man who loved peace and quietness the report of the indignant Mr. Mills was not of a reassuring nature. He hesitated on the doorstep for a few seconds while he fumbled for his key, and then, humming unconcernedly, hung his hat in the passage and walked into the parlour.

The astonished scream of his wife warned him that Mr. Mills had by no means exaggerated. She rose from her seat and, crouching by the fireplace, regarded him with a mixture of anger and dismay.

"It—it's all right, Milly," said Mr. Simpson,

Stepping Backwards

with a smile that revealed a dazzling set of teeth.

"Who are you?" demanded Mrs. Simpson. "How dare you call me by my Christian name! It's a good job for you my husband is not here."

"He wouldn't hurt me," said Mr. Simpson, with an attempt at facetiousness. "He's the best friend I ever had. Why, we slept in the same cradle."

"I don't want any of your nonsense," said Mrs. Simpson. "You get out of my house before I send for the police. How dare you come into a respectable woman's house in this fashion? Be off with you."

"Now, look here, Milly——" began Mr. Simpson.

His wife drew herself up to her full height of four feet eleven.

"I've had a hair-cut and a shave," pursued her husband; "also I've had my hair restored to its natural colour. But I'm the same man, and you know it."

Stepping Backwards

"I know nothing of the kind," said his wife, doggedly. "I don't know you from Adam. I've never seen you before, and I don't want to see you again. You go away."

"I'm your husband, and my place is at home," replied Mr. Simpson. "A man can have a shave if he likes, can't he? Where's my supper?"

"Go on," said his wife. "Keep it up. But be careful my husband don't come in and catch you, that's all."

Mr. Simpson gazed at her fixedly, and then, with an impatient exclamation, walked into the small kitchen and began to set the supper. A joint of cold beef, a jar of pickles, bread, butter, and cheese made an appetizing display. Then he took a jug from the dresser and descended to the cellar.

A musical trickling fell on the ear of Mrs. Simpson as she stood at the parlour door, and drew her stealthily to the cellar. The key was in the lock, and, with a sudden movement, she closed the door and locked it. A

Stepping Backwards

sharp cry from Mr. Simpson testified to his discomfiture.

"Now I'm off for the police," cried his wife.

"Don't be a fool," shouted Mr. Simpson, tugging wildly at the door-handle. "Open the door."

Mrs. Simpson remained silent, and her husband resumed his efforts until the door-knob, unused to such treatment, came off in his hand. A sudden scrambling noise on the cellar stairs satisfied the listener that he had not pulled it off intentionally.

She stood for a few moments, considering. It was a stout door and opened inwards. She took her bonnet from its nail in the kitchen and, walking softly to the street-door, set off to lay the case before a brother who lived a few doors away.

"Poor old Bill," said Mr. Cooper, when she had finished. "Still, it might be worse; he's got the barrel o' beer with him."

"It's not Bill," said Mrs. Simpson.

Stepping Backwards

Mr. Cooper scratched his whiskers and looked at his wife.

"She ought to know," said the latter.

"We'll come and have a look at him," said Mr. Cooper.

Mrs. Simpson pondered, and eyed him dubiously.

"Come in and have a bit of supper," she said at last. "There's a nice piece of beef and pickles."

"And Bill—I mean the stranger—sitting on the beer-barrel," said Mr. Cooper, gloomily.

"You can bring your beer with you," said his sister, sharply. "Come along."

Mr. Cooper grinned, and, placing a couple of bottles in his coat pockets, followed the two ladies to the house. Seated at the kitchen table, he grinned again, as a persistent drumming took place on the cellar door. His wife smiled, and a faint, sour attempt in the same direction appeared on the face of Mrs. Simpson.

"Open the door!" bellowed an indignant voice. "Open the door!"

Stepping Backwards

Mrs. Simpson, commanding silence with an uplifted finger, proceeded to carve the beef. A rattle of knives and forks succeeded.

"O—pen—the—door!" said the voice again.

"Not so much noise," commanded Mr. Cooper. "I can't hear myself eat."

"Bob!" said the voice, in relieved accents, "Bob! Come and let me out."

Mr. Cooper, putting a huge hand over his mouth, struggled nobly with his feelings.

"Who are you calling 'Bob'?" he demanded, in an unsteady voice. "You keep yourself to yourself. I've heard all about you. You've got to stay there till my brother-in-law comes home."

"It's me, Bob," said Mr. Simpson—"Bill."

"Yes, I dare say," said Mr. Cooper; "but if you're Bill, why haven't you got Bill's voice?"

"Let me out and look at me," said Mr. Simpson.

There was a faint scream from both ladies, followed by protests.

Stepping Backwards

“Don’t be alarmed,” said Mr. Cooper, reassuringly. “I wasn’t born yesterday. I don’t want to get a crack over the head.”

“It’s all a mistake, Bob,” said the prisoner, appealingly. “I just had a shave and a haircut and—and a little hair-dye. If you open the door you’ll know me at once.”

“How would it be,” said Mr. Cooper, turning to his sister, and speaking with unusual distinctness—“how would it be if you opened the door, and just as he put his head out I hit it a crack with the poker?”

“You try it on,” said the voice behind the door, hotly. “You know who I am well enough, Bob Cooper. I don’t want any more of your nonsense. Milly has put you up to this!”

“If your wife don’t know you, how do you think I can?” said Mr. Cooper. “Now, look here; you keep quiet till my brother-in-law comes home. If he don’t come home perhaps we shall be more likely to think you’re him. If he’s not home by to-morrow morning

Stepping Backwards

we—— *Hsh ! Hsh !* Don't you know there's ladies present ?”

“That settles it,” said Mrs. Cooper, speaking for the first time. “My brother-in-law would never talk like that.”

“I should never forgive him if he did,” said her husband, piously.

He poured himself out another glass of beer and resumed his supper with relish. Conversation turned on the weather, and from that to the price of potatoes. Frantic efforts on the part of the prisoner to join in the conversation and give it a more personal turn were disregarded. Finally he began to kick with monotonous persistency on the door.

“Stop it !” shouted Mr. Cooper.

“I won't,” said Mr. Simpson.

The noise became unendurable. Mr. Cooper, who had just lit his pipe, laid it on the table and looked round at his companions.

“He'll have the door down soon,” he said, rising. “Halloa, there !”

“Halloa !” said the other.

Stepping Backwards

"You say you're Bill Simpson," said Mr. Cooper, holding up a forefinger at Mrs. Simpson, who was about to interrupt. "If you are, tell us something you know that only you could know; something we know, so as to identify you. Things about your past."

A strange noise sounded behind the door.

"Sounds as though he is smacking his lips," said Mrs. Cooper to her sister-in-law, who was eyeing Mr. Cooper restlessly.

"Very good," said Mr. Simpson; "I agree. Who is there?"

"Me and my wife and Mrs. Simpson," said Mr. Cooper.

"He is smacking his lips," whispered Mrs. Cooper. "Having a go at the beer, perhaps."

"Let's go back fifteen years," said Mr. Simpson in meditative tones. "Do you remember that girl with copper-coloured hair that used to live in John Street?"

"No!" said Mr. Cooper, loudly and suddenly.

"Do you remember coming to me one day

Stepping Backwards

—two days after Valentine Day, it was—white as chalk and shaking like a leaf, and——”

“NO!” roared Mr. Cooper.

“Very well, I must try something else, then,” said Mr. Simpson, philosophically. “Carry your mind back ten years, Bob Cooper——”

“Look here!” said Mr. Cooper, turning round with a ghastly smile. “We’d better get off home, Mary. I don’t like interfering in other people’s concerns. Never did.”

“You stay where you are,” said his wife.

“Ten years,” repeated the voice behind the door. “There was a new barmaid at the Crown, and one night you——”

“If I listen to any more of this nonsense I shall burst,” remarked Mr. Cooper, plaintively.

“Go on,” prompted Mrs. Cooper, grimly. “One night——”

“Never mind,” said Mr. Simpson. “It doesn’t matter. But does he identify me? Because if not I’ve got a lot more things I can try.”

Stepping Backwards

The harassed Mr. Cooper looked around appealingly.

"How do you expect me to recognize you——" he began, and stopped suddenly.

"Go back to your courting days, then," said Mr. Simpson, "when Mrs. Cooper wasn't Mrs. Cooper, but only wanted to be."

Mrs. Cooper shivered; so did Mr. Cooper.

"And you came round to me for advice," pursued Mr. Simpson, in reminiscent accents, "because there was another girl you wasn't sure of, and you didn't want to lose them both. Do you remember sitting with the two photographs—one on each knee—and trying to make up your mind?"

"Wonderful imagination," said Mr. Cooper, smiling in a ghastly fashion at his wife. "Hark at him!"

"I am harking," said Mrs. Cooper.

"Am I Bill Simpson or am I not?" demanded Mr. Simpson.

"Bill was always fond of his joke," said Mr. Cooper, with a glance at the company that

Stepping Backwards

would have moved an oyster. "He was always fond of making up things. You're like him in that. What do you think, Milly?"

"It's not my husband," said Mrs. Simpson.

"Tell us something about her," said Mr. Cooper, hastily.

"I daren't," said Mr. Simpson. "Doesn't that prove I'm her husband? But I'll tell you things about your wife, if you like."

"You dare!" said Mrs. Cooper, turning crimson, as she realized what confidences might have passed between husband and wife. "If you say a word of your lies about me, I don't know what I won't do to you."

"Very well, I must go on about Bob, then—till he recognizes me," said Mr. Simpson, patiently. "Carry your mind——"

"Open the door and let him out," shouted Mr. Cooper, turning to his sister. "How can I recognize a man through a deal door?"

Mrs. Simpson, after a little hesitation, handed him the key, and the next moment

Stepping Backwards

her husband stepped out and stood blinking in the gas-light.

"Do you recognize me?" he asked, turning to Mr. Cooper.

"I do," said that gentleman, with a ferocious growl.

"I'd know you anywhere," said Mrs. Cooper, with emphasis.

"And you?" said Mr. Simpson, turning to his wife.

"You're not my husband," she said, obstinately.

"Are you sure?" inquired Mr. Cooper.

"Certain."

"Very good, then," said her brother. "If he's not your husband I'm going to knock his head off for telling them lies about me."

He sprang forward and, catching Mr. Simpson by the collar, shook him violently until his head banged against the dresser. The next moment the hands of Mrs. Simpson were in the hair of Mr. Cooper.

"How dare you knock my husband about!"

Stepping Backwards

she screamed, as Mr. Cooper let go and caught her fingers. "You've hurt him."

"Concussion, I think," said Mr. Simpson, with great presence of mind.

His wife helped him to a chair and, wetting her handkerchief at the tap, tenderly bathed the dyed head. Mr. Cooper, breathing hard, stood by watching until his wife touched him on the arm.

"You come off home," she said, in a hard voice. "You ain't wanted. Are you going to stay here all night?"

"I should like to," said Mr. Cooper, wistfully.

THE THREE SISTERS

The Three Sisters

THIRTY years ago on a wet autumn evening the household of Mallett's Lodge was gathered round the death-bed of Ursula Mallow, the eldest of the three sisters who inhabited it. The dingy moth-eaten curtains of the old wooden bedstead were drawn apart, the light of a smoking oil-lamp falling upon the hopeless countenance of the dying woman as she turned her dull eyes upon her sisters. The room was in silence except for an occasional sob from the youngest sister, Eunice. Outside the rain fell steadily over the steaming marshes.

"Nothing is to be changed, Tabitha," gasped Ursula to the other sister, who bore a striking likeness to her although her expression was harder and colder; "this room is to be locked up and never opened."

The Three Sisters

"Very well," said Tabitha brusquely, "though I don't see how it can matter to you then."

"It does matter," said her sister with startling energy. "How do you know, how do I know that I may not sometimes visit it? I have lived in this house so long I am certain that I shall see it again. I *will* come back. Come back to watch over you both and see that no harm befalls you."

"You are talking wildly," said Tabitha, by no means moved at her sister's solicitude for her welfare. "Your mind is wandering; you know that I have no faith in such things."

Ursula sighed, and beckoning to Eunice, who was weeping silently at the bedside, placed her feeble arms around her neck and kissed her.

"Do not weep, dear," she said feebly. "Perhaps it is best so. A lonely woman's life is scarce worth living. We have no hopes, no aspirations; other women have had happy husbands and children, but we in this forgotten

The Three Sisters

place have grown old together. I go first, but you must soon follow."

Tabitha, comfortably conscious of only forty years and an iron frame, shrugged her shoulders and smiled grimly.

"I go first," repeated Ursula in a new and strange voice as her heavy eyes slowly closed, "but I will come for each of you in turn, when your lease of life runs out. At that moment I will be with you to lead your steps whither I now go."

As she spoke the flickering lamp went out suddenly as though extinguished by a rapid hand, and the room was left in utter darkness. A strange suffocating noise issued from the bed, and when the trembling women had relighted the lamp, all that was left of Ursula Mallow was ready for the grave.

That night the survivors passed together. The dead woman had been a firm believer in the existence of that shadowy borderland which is said to form an unhallowed link between the living and the dead, and even the stolid Tabitha,

The Three Sisters

slightly unnerved by the events of the night, was not free from certain apprehensions that she might have been right.

With the bright morning their fears disappeared. The sun stole in at the window, and seeing the poor earthworn face on the pillow so touched it and glorified it that only its goodness and weakness were seen, and the beholders came to wonder how they could ever have felt any dread of aught so calm and peaceful. A day or two passed, and the body was transferred to a massive coffin long regarded as the finest piece of work of its kind ever turned out of the village carpenter's workshop. Then a slow and melancholy cortège headed by four bearers wound its solemn way across the marshes to the family vault in the grey old church, and all that was left of Ursula was placed by the father and mother who had taken that self-same journey some thirty years before.

To Eunice as they toiled slowly home the day seemed strange and Sabbath-like, the flat prospect of marsh wilder and more forlorn

The Three Sisters

than usual, the roar of the sea more depressing. Tabitha had no such fancies. The bulk of the dead woman's property had been left to Eunice, and her avaricious soul was sorely troubled and her proper sisterly feelings of regret for the deceased sadly interfered with in consequence.

"What are you going to do with all that money, Eunice?" she asked as they sat at their quiet tea.

"I shall leave it as it stands," said Eunice slowly. "We have both got sufficient to live upon, and I shall devote the income from it to supporting some beds in a children's hospital."

"If Ursula had wished it to go to a hospital," said Tabitha in her deep tones, "she would have left the money to it herself. I wonder you do not respect her wishes more."

"What else can I do with it then?" inquired Eunice.

"Save it," said the other with gleaming eyes, "save it."

The Three Sisters

Eunice shook her head.

"No," said she, "it shall go to the sick children, but the principal I will not touch, and if I die before you it shall become yours and you can do what you like with it."

"Very well," said Tabitha, smothering her anger by a strong effort; "I don't believe that was what Ursula meant you to do with it, and I don't believe she will rest quietly in the grave while you squander the money she stored so carefully."

"What do you mean?" asked Eunice with pale lips. "You are trying to frighten me; I thought that you did not believe in such things."

Tabitha made no answer, and to avoid the anxious inquiring gaze of her sister, drew her chair to the fire, and folding her gaunt arms, composed herself for a nap.

For some time life went on quietly in the old house. The room of the dead woman, in accordance with her last desire, was kept firmly locked, its dirty windows forming a strange

The Three Sisters

contrast to the prim cleanliness of the others. Tabitha, never very talkative, became more taciturn than ever, and stalked about the house and the neglected garden like an unquiet spirit, her brow roughened into the deep wrinkles suggestive of much thought. As the winter came on, bringing with it the long dark evenings, the old house became more lonely than ever, and an air of mystery and dread seemed to hang over it and brood in its empty rooms and dark corridors. The deep silence of night was broken by strange noises for which neither the wind nor the rats could be held accountable. Old Martha, seated in her distant kitchen, heard strange sounds upon the stairs, and once, upon hurrying to them, fancied that she saw a dark figure squatting upon the landing, though a subsequent search with candle and spectacles failed to discover anything. Eunice was disturbed by several vague incidents, and, as she suffered from a complaint of the heart, rendered very ill by them. Even Tabitha admitted a strangeness about the

The Three Sisters

house, but, confident in her piety and virtue, took no heed of it, her mind being fully employed in another direction.

Since the death of her sister all restraint upon her was removed, and she yielded herself up entirely to the stern and hard rules enforced by avarice upon its devotees. Her house-keeping expenses were kept rigidly separate from those of Eunice and her food limited to the coarsest dishes, while in the matter of clothes, the old servant was by far the better dressed. Seated alone in her bedroom this uncouth, hard-featured creature revelled in her possessions, grudging even the expense of the candle-end which enabled her to behold them. So completely did this passion change her that both Eunice and Martha became afraid of her, and lay awake in their beds night after night trembling at the chinking of the coins at her unholy vigils.

One day Eunice ventured to remonstrate. "Why don't you bank your money, Tabitha?"

The Three Sisters

she said; "it is surely not safe to keep such large sums in such a lonely house."

"Large sums!" repeated the exasperated Tabitha, "large sums! what nonsense is this? You know well that I have barely sufficient to keep me."

"It's a great temptation to housebreakers," said her sister, not pressing the point. "I made sure last night that I heard somebody in the house."

"Did you?" said Tabitha, grasping her arm, a horrible look on her face. "So did I. I thought they went to Ursula's room, and I got out of bed and went on the stairs to listen."

"Well?" said Eunice faintly, fascinated by the look on her sister's face.

"There was *something* there," said Tabitha slowly. "I'll swear it, for I stood on the landing by her door and listened; something scuffling on the floor round and round the room. At first I thought it was the cat, but when I went up there this morning the

The Three Sisters

door was still locked, and the cat was in the kitchen."

"Oh, let us leave this dreadful house," moaned Eunice.

"What!" said her sister grimly; "afraid of poor Ursula? Why should you be? Your own sister who nursed you when you were a babe, and who perhaps even now comes and watches over your slumbers."

"Oh!" said Eunice, pressing her hand to her side, "if I saw her I should die. I should think that she had come for me as she said she would. O God! have mercy on me, I am dying."

She reeled as she spoke, and before Tabitha could save her, sank senseless to the floor.

"Get some water," cried Tabitha, as old Martha came hurrying up the stairs, "Eunice has fainted."

The old woman, with a timid glance at her, retired, reappearing shortly afterwards with the water, with which she proceeded to restore her much-loved mistress to her senses. Tabitha,

The Three Sisters

as soon as this was accomplished, stalked off to her room, leaving her sister and Martha sitting drearily enough in the small parlour, watching the fire and conversing in whispers.

It was clear to the old servant that this state of things could not last much longer, and she repeatedly urged her mistress to leave a house so lonely and so mysterious. To her great delight Eunice at length consented, despite the fierce opposition of her sister, and at the mere idea of leaving gained greatly in health and spirits. A small but comfortable house was hired in Morville, and arrangements made for a speedy change.

It was the last night in the old house, and all the wild spirits of the marshes, the wind and the sea seemed to have joined forces for one supreme effort. When the wind dropped, as it did at brief intervals, the sea was heard moaning on the distant beach, strangely mingled with the desolate warning of the bell-buoy as it rocked to the waves. Then the wind rose again, and the noise of the sea was lost in the

The Three Sisters

fierce gusts which, finding no obstacle on the open marshes, swept with their full fury upon the house by the creek. The strange voices of the air shrieked in its chimneys, windows rattled, doors slammed, and even the very curtains seemed to live and move.

Eunice was in bed, awake. A small night-light in a saucer of oil shed a sickly glare upon the worm-eaten old furniture, distorting the most innocent articles into ghastly shapes. A wilder gust than usual almost deprived her of the protection afforded by that poor light, and she lay listening fearfully to the creakings and other noises on the stairs, bitterly regretting that she had not asked Martha to sleep with her. But it was not too late even now. She slipped hastily to the floor, crossed to the huge wardrobe, and was in the very act of taking her dressing-gown from its peg when an unmistakable footfall was heard on the stairs. The robe dropped from her shaking fingers, and with a quickly beating heart she regained her bed.

The Three Sisters

The sounds ceased and a deep silence followed, which she herself was unable to break although she strove hard to do so. A wild gust of wind shook the windows and nearly extinguished the light, and when its flame had regained its accustomed steadiness she saw that the door was slowly opening, while the huge shadow of a hand blotted the papered wall. Still her tongue refused its office. The door flew open with a crash, a cloaked figure entered and, throwing aside its coverings, she saw with a horror past all expression the napkin-bound face of the dead Ursula smiling terribly at her. In her last extremity she raised her faded eyes above for succour, and then as the figure noiselessly advanced and laid its cold hand upon her brow, the soul of Eunice Mallow left its body with a wild shriek and made its way to the Eternal.

Martha, roused by the cry, and shivering with dread, rushed to the door and gazed in terror at the figure which stood leaning over the bedside. As she watched, it slowly removed

The Three Sisters

the cowl and the napkin and exposed the fell face of Tabitha, so strangely contorted between fear and triumph that she hardly recognized it.

"Who's there?" cried Tabitha in a terrible voice as she saw the old woman's shadow on the wall.

"I thought I heard a cry," said Martha, entering. "Did anybody call?"

"Yes, Eunice," said the other, regarding her closely. "I, too, heard the cry, and hurried to her. What makes her so strange? Is she in a trance?"

"Ay," said the old woman, falling on her knees by the bed and sobbing bitterly, "the trance of death. Ah, my dear, my poor lonely girl, that this should be the end of it! She has died of fright," said the old woman, pointing to the eyes, which even yet retained their horror. "She has seen something *devilish*."

Tabitha's gaze fell. "She has always suffered with her heart," she muttered; "the night has frightened her; it frightened me."

She stood upright by the foot of the bed as

The Three Sisters

Martha drew the sheet over the face of the dead woman.

“First Ursula, then Eunice,” said Tabitha, drawing a deep breath. “I can’t stay here. I’ll dress and wait for the morning.”

She left the room as she spoke, and with bent head proceeded to her own. Martha remained by the bedside, and gently closing the staring eyes, fell on her knees, and prayed long and earnestly for the departed soul. Overcome with grief and fear she remained with bowed head until a sudden sharp cry from Tabitha brought her to her feet.

“Well,” said the old woman, going to the door.

“Where are you?” cried Tabitha, somewhat reassured by her voice.

“In Miss Eunice’s bedroom. Do you want anything?”

“Come down at once. Quick! I am unwell.”

Her voice rose suddenly to a scream. “Quick! For God’s sake! Quick, or I shall

The Three Sisters

go mad. *There is some strange woman in the house.*"

The old woman stumbled hastily down the dark stairs. "What is the matter?" she cried, entering the room. "Who is it? What do you mean?"

"I saw it," said Tabitha, grasping her convulsively by the shoulder. "I was coming to you when I saw the figure of a woman in front of me going up the stairs. Is it—can it be Ursula come for the soul of Eunice, as she said she would?"

"Or for yours?" said Martha, the words coming from her in some odd fashion, despite herself.

Tabitha, with a ghastly look, fell cowering by her side, clutching tremulously at her clothes. "Light the lamps," she cried hysterically. "Light a fire, make a noise; oh, this dreadful darkness! Will it never be day!"

"Soon, soon," said Martha, overcoming her repugnance and trying to pacify her. "When the day comes you will laugh at these fears."

The Three Sisters

"I murdered her," screamed the miserable woman, "I killed her with fright. Why did she not give me the money? 'Twas no use to her. Ah! *Look there!*"

Martha, with a horrible fear, followed her glance to the door, but saw nothing.

"It's Ursula," said Tabitha from between her teeth. "Keep her off! Keep her off!"

The old woman, who by some unknown sense seemed to feel the presence of a third person in the room, moved a step forward and stood before her. As she did so Tabitha waved her arms as though to free herself from the touch of a detaining hand, half rose to her feet, and without a word fell dead before her.

At this the old woman's courage forsook her, and with a great cry she rushed from the room, eager to escape from this house of death and mystery. The bolts of the great door were stiff with age, and strange voices seemed to ring in her ears as she strove wildly to unfasten them. Her brain whirled. She thought that the dead in their distant rooms called to her,

The Three Sisters

and that a devil stood on the step outside laughing and holding the door against her. Then with a supreme effort she flung it open, and heedless of her night-clothes passed into the bitter night. The path across the marshes was lost in the darkness, but she found it; the planks over the ditches slippery and narrow, but she crossed them in safety, until at last, her feet bleeding and her breath coming in great gasps, she entered the village and sank down more dead than alive on a cottage doorstep.

THE UNKNOWN

The Unknown

“**H**ANDSOME is as 'andsome does,” said the night-watchman. It's an old saying, but it's true. Give a chap good looks, and it's precious little else that is given to 'im. He's lucky when 'is good looks 'ave gorn—or partly gorn—to get a berth as night-watchman or some other hard and bad-paid job.

One drawback to a good-looking man is that he generally marries young; not because 'e wants to, but because somebody else wants 'im to. And that ain't the worst of it: the handsomest chap I ever knew married five times, and got seven years for it. It wasn't his fault, pore chap; he simply couldn't say No.

One o' the best-looking men I ever knew was Cap'n Bill Smithers, wot used to come

The Unknown

up here once a week with a schooner called the *Wild Rose*. Funny thing about 'im was he didn't seem to know about 'is good looks, and he was one o' the quietest, best-behaved men that ever came up the London river. Considering that he was mistook for me more than once, it was just as well.

He didn't marry until 'e was close on forty; and then 'e made the mistake of marrying a widder-woman. She was like all the rest of 'em—only worse. Afore she was married butter wouldn't melt in 'er mouth, but as soon as she 'ad got her "lines" safe she began to make up for it.

For the fust month or two 'e didn't mind it, 'e rather liked being fussed arter, but when he found that he couldn't go out for arf an hour without having 'er with 'im he began to get tired of it. Her idea was that 'e was too handsome to be trusted out alone; and every trip he made 'e had to write up in a book, day by day, wot 'e did with himself. Even then she wasn't satisfied, and, arter saying that a

The Unknown

wife's place was by the side of 'er husband, she took to sailing with 'im every v'y'ge.

Wot he could ha' seen in 'er I don't know. I asked 'im one evening—in a roundabout way—and he answered in such a long, roundabout way that I didn't know wot to make of it till I see that she was standing just behind me, listening. Arter that I heard 'er asking questions about me, but I didn't 'ave to listen: I could hear 'er twenty yards away, and singing to myself at the same time.

Arter that she treated me as if I was the dirt beneath 'er feet. She never spoke to me, but used to speak against me to other people. She was always talking to them about the "sleeping-sickness" and things o' that kind. She said night-watchmen always made 'er think of it somehow, but she didn't know why, and she couldn't tell you if you was to ask her. The only thing I was thankful for was that I wasn't 'er husband. She stuck to 'im like his shadow, and I began to think at last it was a pity she 'adn't got some-

The Unknown

thing to be jealous about and something to occupy her mind with instead o' me.

"She ought to 'ave a lesson," I ses to the skipper one evening. "Are you going to be follered about like this all your life? If she was made to see the foolishness of 'er ways she might get sick of it."

My idea was to send her on a wild-goose chase, and while the *Wild Rose* was away I thought it out. I wrote a love-letter to the skipper signed with the name of "Dorothy," and asked 'im to meet me at Cleopatra's Needle on the Embankment at eight o'clock on Wednesday. I told 'im to look out for a tall girl (Mrs. Smithers was as short as they make 'em) with mischievous brown eyes, in a blue 'at with red roses on it.

I read it over careful, and arter marking it "Private," twice in front and once on the back, I stuck it down so that it could be blown open a'most, and waited for the schooner to come back. Then I gave a van-boy twopence to 'and it to Mrs. Smithers, wot was sitting on

The Unknown

the deck alone, and tell 'er it was a letter for Captain Smithers.

I was busy with a barge wot happened to be handy at the time, but I 'eard her say that she would take it and give it to 'im. When I peeped round she 'ad got the letter open and was leaning over the side to wind'ard trying to get 'er breath. Every now and then she'd give another look at the letter and open 'er mouth and gasp; but by and by she got calmer, and, arter putting it back in the envelope, she gave it a lick as though she was going to bite it, and stuck it down agin. Then she went off the wharf, and I'm blest if, five minutes arterwards, a young fellow didn't come down to the ship with the same letter and ask for the skipper.

"Who gave it you?" ses the skipper, as soon as 'e could speak.

"A lady," ses the young fellow.

The skipper waved 'im away, and then 'e walked up and down the deck like a man in a dream.

The Unknown

"Bad news?" I ses, looking up and catching 'is eye.

"No," he ses, "no. Only a note about a couple o' casks o' soda."

He stuffed the letter in 'is pocket and sat on the side smoking till his wife came back in five minutes' time, smiling all over with good temper.

"It's a nice evening," she ses, "and I think I'll just run over to Dalston and see my Cousin Joe."

The skipper got up like a lamb and said he'd go and clean 'imself.

"You needn't come if you feel tired," she ses, smiling at 'im.

The skipper could 'ardly believe his ears.

"I do feel tired," he ses. "I've had a heavy day, and I feel more like bed than anything else."

"You turn in, then," she ses. "I'll be all right by myself."

She went down and tidied herself up—not that it made much difference to 'er—and,

The Unknown

arter patting him on the arm and giving me a stare that would ha' made most men blink, she took herself off.

I was pretty busy that evening. Wot with shifting lighters from under the jetty and sweeping up, it was pretty near ha'-past seven afore I 'ad a minute I could call my own. I put down the broom at last, and was just thinking of stepping round to the Bull's Head for a 'arf-pint when I see Cap'n Smithers come off the ship on to the wharf and walk to the gate.

"I thought you was going to turn in?" I ses.

"I did think of it," he ses, "then I thought p'r'aps I'd better stroll as far as Broad Street and meet my wife."

It was all I could do to keep a straight face. I'd a pretty good idea where she 'ad gorn; and it wasn't Dalston.

"Come in and 'ave 'arf a pint fust," I ses.

"No; I shall be late," he ses, hurrying off.

I went in and 'ad a glass by myself, and

The Unknown

stood there so long thinking of Mrs. Smithers walking up and down by Cleopatra's Needle that at last the landlord fust asked me wot I was laughing at, and then offered to make me laugh the other side of my face. And then he wonders why people go to the Albion.

I locked the gate rather earlier than usual that night. Sometimes if I'm up that end I leave it a bit late, but I didn't want Mrs. Smithers to come along and nip in without me seeing her face.

It was ten o'clock afore I heard the bell go, and when I opened the wicket and looked out I was surprised to see that she 'ad got the skipper with 'er. And of all the miserable-looking objects I ever saw in my life he was the worst. She 'ad him tight by the arm, and there was a look on 'er face that a'most scared me.

"Did you go all the way to Dalston for her?" I ses to 'im.

Mrs. Smithers made a gasping sort o' noise, but the skipper didn't answer a word.

The Unknown

She shoved him in in front of 'er and stood over 'im while he climbed aboard. When he held out 'is hand to help 'er she struck it away.

I didn't get word with 'im till five o'clock next morning, when he came up on deck with his 'air all rough and 'is eyes red for want of sleep.

"Haven't 'ad a wink all night," he ses, stepping on to the wharf.

I gave a little cough. "Didn't she 'ave a pleasant time at Dalston?" I ses.

He walked a little further off from the ship. "She didn't go there," he ses, in a whisper.

"You've got something on your mind," I ses. "Wot is it?"

He wouldn't tell me at fust, but at last he told me all about the letter from Dorothy, and 'is wife reading it unbeknown to 'im and going to meet 'er.

"It was an awful meeting!" he ses. "Awful!"

I couldn't think wot to make of it. "Was the gal there, then?" I ses, staring at 'im.

The Unknown

"No," ses the skipper; "but I was."

"*You?*" I ses, starting back. "You! Wot for? I'm surprised at you! I wouldn't ha' believed it of you!"

"I felt a bit curious," he ses, with a silly sort o' smile. "But wot I can't understand is why the gal didn't turn up."

"I'm ashamed of you, Bill," I ses, very severe.

"P'r'aps she did," he ses, 'arf to 'imself, "and then saw my missis standing there waiting. P'r'aps that was it."

"Or p'r'aps it was somebody 'aving a game with you," I ses.

"You're getting old, Bill," he ses, very short. "You don't understand. It's some pore gal that's took a fancy to me, and it's my dooty to meet 'er and tell her 'ow things are."

He walked off with his 'ead in the air, and if 'e took that letter out once and looked at it, he did five times.

"Chuck it away," I ses, going up to him.

The Unknown

"Certainly not," he ses, folding it up careful and stowing it away in 'is breast-pocket. "She's took a fancy to me, and it's my dooty——"

"You said that afore," I ses.

He stared at me nasty for a moment, and then 'e ses: "You ain't seen any young lady hanging about 'ere, I suppose, Bill? A tall young lady with a blue hat trimmed with red roses?"

I shook my 'ead.

"If you should see 'er——" he ses.

"I'll tell your missis," I ses. "It 'ud be much easier for her to do her dooty properly than it would you. She'd enjoy doing it, too."

He went off agin then, and I thought he 'ad done with me, but he 'adn't. He spoke to me that evening as if I was the greatest friend he 'ad in the world. I 'ad two 'arf-pints with 'im at the Albion—with his missis walking up and down outside—and arter the second 'arf-pint he said he wanted to meet Dorothy and tell 'er that 'e was married, and

The Unknown

that he 'oped she would meet some good man that was worthy of 'er.

I had a week's peace while the ship was away, but she was hardly made fast afore I 'ad it all over agin and agin.

"Are you sure there's been no more letters?" he ses.

"Sartain," I ses.

"That's right," he ses; "that's right. And you 'aven't seen her walking up and down?"

"No," I ses.

"'Ave you been on the look-out?" he ses. "I don't suppose a nice gal like that would come and shove her 'ead in at the gate. Did you look up and down the road?"

"Yes," I ses. "I've fair made my eyes ache watching for her."

"I can't understand it," he ses. "It's a mystery to me, unless p'r'aps she's been taken ill. She must 'ave seen me here in the fust place; and she managed to get hold of my name. Mark my words, I shall 'ear from her agin."

The Unknown

“’Ow do you know?” I ses.

“I feel it ’ere,” he ses, very solemn, laying his ’and on his chest.

I didn’t know wot to do. Wot with ’is foolishness and his missis’s temper, I see I ’ad made a mess of it. He told me she had ’ardly spoke a word to ’im for two days, and when I said—being a married man myself—that it might ha’ been worse, ’e said I didn’t know wot I was talking about.

I did a bit o’ thinking arter he ’ad gorn aboard agin. I dursn’t tell ’im that I ’ad wrote the letter, but I thought if he ’ad one or two more he’d see that some one was ’aving a game with ’im, and that it might do ’im good. Besides which it was a little amusement for me.

Arter everybody was in their beds asleep I sat on a clerk’s stool in the office and wrote ’im another letter from Dorothy. I called ’im “Dear Bill,” and I said ’ow sorry I was that I ’adn’t had even a sight of ’im lately, having been laid up with a sprained ankle and ’ad only just got about agin. I asked

The Unknown

'im to meet me at Cleopatra's Needle at eight o'clock, and said that I should wear the blue 'at with red roses.

It was a very good letter, but I can see now that I done wrong in writing it. I was going to post it to 'im, but, as I couldn't find an envelope without the name of the blessed wharf on it, I put it in my pocket till I got 'ome.

I got 'ome at about a quarter to seven, and slept like a child till pretty near four. Then I went downstairs to 'ave my dinner.

The moment I opened the door I see there was something wrong. Three times my missis licked 'er lips afore she could speak. Her face 'ad gone a dirty white colour, and she was leaning forward with her 'ands on her 'ips, trembling all over with temper.

"Is my dinner ready?" I ses, easy-like.
"'Cos I'm ready for *it*."

"I—I wonder I don't tear you limb from limb," she ses, catching her breath.

"Wot's the matter?" I ses.

The Unknown

"And then boil you," she ses, between her teeth. "You in one pot and your precious Dorothy in another."

If anybody 'ad offered me five pounds to speak then, I couldn't ha' done it. I see wot I'd done in a flash, and I couldn't say a word; but I kept my presence o' mind, and as she came round one side o' the table I went round the other.

"Wot 'ave you got to say for yourself?" she ses, with a scream.

"Nothing," I ses, at last. "It's all a mistake."

"Mistake?" she ses. "Yes, you made a mistake leaving it in your pocket; that's all the mistake you've made. That's wot you do, is it, when you're supposed to be at the wharf? Go about with a blue 'at with red roses in it! At your time o' life, and a wife at 'ome working herself to death to make both ends meet and keep you respectable!"

"It's all a mistake," I ses. "The letter wasn't for me."

The Unknown

"Oh, no, o' course not," she ses. "That's why you'd got it in your pocket, I suppose. And I suppose you'll say your name ain't Bill next."

"Don't say things you'll be sorry for," I ses.

"I'll take care o' that," she ses. "I might be sorry for not saying some things, but I don't think I shall."

I don't think she was. I don't think she forgot anything, and she raked up things that I 'ad contradicted years ago and wot I thought was all forgot. And every now and then, when she stopped for breath, she'd try and get round to the same side of the table I was.

She follered me to the street door when I went and called things up the road arter me. I 'ad a snack at a coffee-shop for my dinner, but I 'adn't got much appetite for it; I was too full of trouble and finding fault with myself, and I went off to my work with a 'art as heavy as lead.

I suppose I 'adn't been on the wharf ten

The Unknown

minutes afore Cap'n Smithers came sidling up to me, but I got my spoke in fust.

"Look 'ere," I ses, "if you're going to talk about that forward hussy wot's been writing to you, I ain't. I'm sick and tired of 'er."

"Forward hussy!" he ses. "*Forward hussy!*" And afore I could drop my broom he gave me a punch in the jaw that pretty near broke it. "Say another word against her," he ses, "and I'll knock your ugly 'ead off. How dare you insult a lady?"

I thought I should 'ave gone crazy at fust, but I went off into the office without a word. Some men would ha' knocked 'im down for it, but I made allowances for 'is state o' mind, and I stayed inside until I see 'im get aboard agin.

He was sitting on deck when I went out, and his missis too, but neither of 'em spoke a word. I picked up my broom and went on sweeping, when suddenly I 'eard a voice at the gate I thought I knew, and in came my wife.

"Ho!" she ses, calling out. "Ain't you

The Unknown

gone to meet that gal at Cleopatra's Needle yet? You ain't going to keep 'er waiting, are you?"

"*H'sh!*" I ses.

"*H'sh!* yourself," she ses, shouting. "*I've* done nothing to be ashamed of. *I* don't go to meet other people's husbands in a blue 'at with red roses. *I* don't write 'em love-letters, and say '*H'sh!*' to my wife when she ventures to make a remark about it. *I* may work myself to skin and bone for a man wot's old enough to know better, but *I*'m not going to be trod on. Dorothy, indeed! *I'll* Dorothy 'er if *I* get the chance."

Mrs. Smithers, wot 'ad been listening with all her ears, jumped up, and so did the skipper, and Mrs. Smithers came to the side in two steps.

"Did you say 'Dorothy,' ma'am?" she ses to my missis.

"*I* did," ses my wife. "*She's* been writing to my husband."

"It must be the same one," ses Mrs. Smithers. "*She's* been writing to mine too."

The Unknown

The two of 'em stood there looking at each other for a minute, and then my wife, holding the letter between 'er finger and thumb as if it was pison, passed it to Mrs. Smithers.

"It's the same," ses Mrs. Smithers. "Was the envelope marked 'Private'?"

"I didn't see no envelope," ses my missis. "This is all I found."

Mrs. Smithers stepped on to the wharf and, taking 'old of my missis by the arm, led her away whispering. At the same moment the skipper walked across the deck and whispered to me.

"Wot d'ye mean by it?" he ses. "Wot d'ye mean by 'aving letters from Dorothy and not telling me about it?"

"I can't help 'aving letters any more than you can," I ses. "Now p'r'aps you'll understand wot I meant by calling 'er a forward hussy."

"Fancy 'er writing to you!" he ses, wrinkling 'is forehead. "*Pph!* She must be crazy."

"P'r'aps it ain't a gal at all," I ses. "My

The Unknown

belief is somebody is 'aving a game with us."

"Don't be a fool," he ses. "I'd like to see the party as would make a fool of me like that. Just see 'im and get my 'ands on him. He wouldn't want to play any more games."

It was no good talking to 'im. He was 'arf crazy with temper. If I'd said the letter was meant for 'im he'd 'ave asked me wot I meant by opening it and getting 'im into more trouble with 'is missis, instead of giving it to 'im on the quiet. I just stood and suffered in silence, and thought wot a lot of 'arm eddication did for people.

"I want some money," ses my missis, coming back at last with Mrs. Smithers.

That was the way she always talked when she'd got me in 'er power. She took two-and-tenpence—all I'd got—and then she ordered me to go and get a cab.

"Me and this lady are going to meet her," she ses, sniffing at me.

The Unknown

"And tell her wot we think of 'er," ses Mrs. Smithers, sniffing too.

"And wot we'll do to 'er," ses my missis.

I left 'em standing side by side, looking at the skipper as if 'e was a waxworks, while I went to find a cab. When I came back they was in the same persition, and 'e was smoking with 'is eyes shut.

They went off side by side in the cab, both of 'em sitting bolt-upright, and only turning their 'eads at the last moment to give us looks we didn't want.

"I don't wish her no 'arm," ses the skipper, arter thinking for a long time. "Was that the fust letter you 'ad from 'er, Bill?"

"Fust and last," I ses, grinding my teeth.

"I hope they won't meet 'er, pore thing," he ses.

"I've been married longer than wot you have," I ses, "and I tell you one thing. It won't make no difference to us whether they do or they don't," I ses.

And it didn't.

THE VIGIL

The Vigil

"I'M the happiest man in the world," said Mr. Farrer, in accents of dreamy tenderness.

Miss Ward sighed. "Wait till father comes in," she said.

Mr. Farrer peered through the plants which formed a welcome screen to the window and listened with some uneasiness. He was waiting for the firm, springy step that should herald the approach of ex-Sergeant-Major Ward. A squeeze of Miss Ward's hand renewed his courage.

"Perhaps I had better light the lamp," said the girl, after a long pause. "I wonder where mother's got to?"

"She's on my side, at any rate," said Mr. Farrer.

The Vigil

"Poor mother!" said the girl. "She daren't call her soul her own. I expect she's sitting in her bedroom with the door shut. She hates unpleasantness. And there's sure to be some."

"So do I," said the young man, with a slight shiver. "But why should there be any? He doesn't want you to keep single all your life, does he?"

"He'd like me to marry a soldier," said Miss Ward. "He says that the young men of the present day are too soft. The only thing he thinks about is courage and strength."

She rose and, placing the lamp on the table, removed the chimney, and then sought round the room for the matches. Mr. Farrer, who had two boxes in his pocket, helped her.

They found a box at last on the mantel-piece, and Mr. Farrer steadied her by placing one arm round her waist while she lit the lamp. A sudden exclamation from outside reminded them that the blind was not yet drawn, and they sprang apart in dismay as a

The Vigil

grizzled and upright old warrior burst into the room and confronted them.

"Pull that blind down!" he roared. "Not you," he continued, as Mr. Farrer hastened to help. "What do you mean by touching my blind? What do you mean by embracing my daughter? Eh? Why don't you answer?"

"We—we are going to be married," said Mr. Farrer, trying to speak boldly.

The sergeant-major drew himself up, and the young man gazed in dismay at a chest which seemed as though it would never cease expanding.

"Married!" exclaimed the sergeant-major, with a grim laugh. "Married to a little tame bunny-rabbit! Not if I know it. Where's your mother?" he demanded, turning to the girl.

"Upstairs," was the reply.

Her father raised his voice, and a nervous reply came from above. A minute later Mrs. Ward, pale of cheek, entered the room.

"Here's fine goings-on!" said the sergeant-

The Vigil

major, sharply. "I go for a little walk, and when I come back this—this infernal cockroach has got its arm round my daughter's waist. Why don't you look after her? Do you know anything about it?"

His wife shook her head.

"Five feet four and about thirty round the chest, and wants to marry my daughter!" said the sergeant-major, with a sneer. "Eh? What's that? What did you say? What?"

"I said that's a pretty good size for a cockroach," murmured Mr. Farrer, defiantly. "Besides, size isn't everything. If it was, you'd be a general instead of only a sergeant-major."

"You get out of my house," said the other, as soon as he could get his breath. "Go on! Sharp with it."

"I'm going," said the mortified Mr. Farrer. "I'm sorry if I was rude. I came on purpose to see you to-night. Bertha—Miss Ward, I mean—told me your ideas, but I couldn't believe her. I said you'd got more common

The Vigil

sense than to object to a man just because he wasn't a soldier."

"I want a *man* for a son-in-law," said the other. "I don't say he's got to be a soldier."

"Just so," said Mr. Farrer. "You're a man, ain't you? Well, I'll do anything that you'll do."

"*Phh!*" said the sergeant-major. "I've done my little lot. I've been in action four times, and wounded in three places. That's my tally."

"The colonel said once that my husband doesn't know what fear is," said Mrs. Ward, timidly. "He's afraid of nothing."

"Except ghosts," remarked her daughter, softly.

"Hold your tongue, miss," said her father, twisting his moustache. "No sensible man is afraid of what doesn't exist."

"A lot of people believe they do, though," said Mr. Farrer, breaking in. "I heard the other night that old Smith's ghost has been

The Vigil

seen again swinging from the apple tree. Three people have seen it."

"Rubbish!" said the sergeant-major.

"Maybe," said the young man; "but I'll bet you, Mr. Ward, for all your courage, that you won't go up there alone at twelve o'clock one night to see."

"I thought I ordered you out of my house just now," said the sergeant-major, glaring at him.

"Going into action," said Mr. Farrer, pausing at the door, "is one thing—you have to obey orders and you can't help yourself; but going to a lonely cottage two miles off to see the ghost of a man that hanged himself is another."

"Do you mean to say I'm afraid?" blustered the other.

Mr. Farrer shook his head. "I don't say anything," he remarked; "but even a cockroach does a bit of thinking sometimes."

"Perhaps *you'd* like to go," said the sergeant-major.

The Vigil

"I don't mind," said the young man; "and perhaps you'll think a little better of me, Mr. Ward. If I do what you're afraid to do——"

Mrs. Ward and her daughter flung themselves hastily between the sergeant-major and his intended sacrifice. Mr. Farrer, pale but determined, stood his ground.

"I'll dare you to go up and spend a night there alone," he said.

"I'll dare you," said the incensed warrior, weakly.

"All right; I'll spend Wednesday night there," said Mr. Farrer, "and I'll come round on Thursday and let you know how I got on."

"I dare say," said the other; "but I don't want you here, and, what's more, I won't have you. You can go to Smith's cottage on Wednesday at twelve o'clock if you like, and I'll go up any time between twelve and three and make sure you're there. D'ye understand? I'll show you whether I'm afraid or not."

"There's no reason for you to be afraid," said Mr. Farrer. "I shall be there to protect

The Vigil

you. That's very different to being there alone, as I shall be. But, of course, you can go up the next night by yourself, and wait for me, if you like. If you like to prove *your* courage, I mean."

"When I want to be ordered about," said the sergeant-major, in a magnificent voice, "I'll let you know. Now go, before I do anything I might be sorry for afterwards."

He stood at the door, erect as a ramrod, and watched the young man up the road. His conversation at the supper-table that night related almost entirely to puppy-dogs and the best way of training them.

He kept a close eye upon his daughter for the next day or two, but human nature has its limits. He tried to sleep one afternoon in his easy-chair with one eye open, but the exquisite silence maintained by Miss Ward was too much for it. A hum of perfect content arose from the feature below, and five minutes later Miss Ward was speeding in search of Mr. Farrer.



Mrs. Ward and her daughter flung themselves hastily between
the sergeant-major and his intended sacrifice

The Vigil

"I had to come, Ted," she said, breathlessly, "because to-morrow's Wednesday. I've got something to tell you, but I don't know whether I ought to."

"Tell me and let me decide," said Mr. Farrer, tenderly.

"I—I'm so afraid you might be frightened," said the girl. "I won't tell you, but I'll give you a hint. If you see anything awful, don't be frightened."

Mr. Farrer stroked her hand. "The only thing I'm afraid of is your father," he said, softly.

"Oh!" said the girl, clasping her hands together. "You have guessed it."

"Guessed it?" said Mr. Farrer.

Miss Ward nodded. "I happened to pass his door this morning," she said, in a low voice. "It was open a little way, and he was standing up and measuring one of mother's nightgowns against his chest. I couldn't think what he was doing it for at first."

Mr. Farrer whistled and his face hardened.

The Vigil

"That's not fair play," he said at last. "All right; I'll be ready for him."

"He doesn't like to be put in the wrong," said Miss Ward. "He wants to prove that you haven't got any courage. He'd be disappointed if he found you had."

"All right," said Mr. Farrer again. "You're an angel for coming to tell me."

"Father would call me something else, I expect," said Miss Ward, with a smile. "Good-bye. I want to get back before he wakes up."

She was back in her chair, listening to her father's slumbers, half an hour before he awoke.

"I'm making up for to-morrow night," he said, opening his eyes suddenly.

His daughter nodded.

"Shows strength of will," continued the sergeant-major, amiably. "Wellington could go to sleep at any time by just willing it. I'm the same way; I can go to sleep at five minutes' notice."

The Vigil

"It's a very useful gift," said Miss Ward, piously, "very."

Mr. Ward had two naps the next day. He awoke from the second at twelve-thirty a.m., and in a somewhat disagreeable frame of mind rose and stretched himself. The house was very still. He took a small brown-paper parcel from behind the sofa and, extinguishing the lamp, put on his cap and opened the front door.

If the house was quiet, the little street seemed dead. He closed the door softly and stepped into the darkness. In terms which would have been understood by "our army in Flanders" he execrated the forefathers, the name, and the upbringing of Mr. Edward Farrer.

Not a soul in the streets; not a light in a window. He left the little town behind, passed the last isolated house on the road, and walked into the greater blackness of a road between tall hedges. He had put on canvas shoes with rubber soles, for the better surprise

The Vigil

of Mr. Farrer, and his own progress seemed to partake of a ghostly nature. Every ghost story he had ever heard or read crowded into his memory. For the first time in his experience even the idea of the company of Mr. Farrer seemed better than no company at all.

The night was so dark that he nearly missed the turning that led to the cottage. For the first few yards he had almost to feel his way; then, with a greater yearning than ever for the society of Mr. Farrer, he straightened his back and marched swiftly and noiselessly towards the cottage.

It was a small, tumble-down place, set well back in an overgrown garden. The sergeant-major came to a halt just before reaching the gate, and, hidden by the hedge, unfastened his parcel and shook out his wife's best nightgown.

He got it over his head with some difficulty, and, with his arms in the sleeves, tried in vain to get his big hands through the small, lace-trimmed wristbands. Despite his utmost

The Vigil

efforts he could only get two or three fingers through, and after a vain search for his cap, which had fallen off in the struggle, he made his way to the gate and stood there waiting. It was at this moment that the thought occurred to him that Mr. Farrer might have failed to keep the appointment.

His knees trembled slightly and he listened anxiously for any sound from the house. He rattled the gate and, standing with white arms outstretched, waited. Nothing happened. He shook it again, and then, pulling himself together, opened it and slipped into the garden. As he did so a large bough which lay in the centre of the footpath thoughtfully drew on one side to let him pass.

Mr. Ward stopped suddenly and, with his gaze fixed on the bough, watched it glide over the grass until it was swallowed up in the darkness. His own ideas of frightening Mr. Farrer were forgotten, and in a dry, choking voice he called loudly upon the name of that gentleman.

The Vigil

He called two or three times, with no response, and then, in a state of panic, backed slowly towards the gate with his eyes fixed on the house. A loud crash sounded from somewhere inside, the door was flung violently open, and a gruesome figure in white hopped out and squatted on the step.

It was evident to Sergeant-Major Ward that Mr. Farrer was not there, and that no useful purpose could be served by remaining. It was clear that the young man's courage had failed him, and, with grey head erect, elbows working like the sails of a windmill, and the ends of the nightgown streaming behind him, the sergeant-major bent his steps towards home.

He dropped into a walk after a time and looked carefully over his shoulder. So far as he could see he was alone, but the silence and loneliness were oppressive. He looked again, and, without stopping to inquire whether his eyes had deceived him, broke into a run again. Alternately walking and running, he got back to the town, and walked

The Vigil

swiftly along the streets to his house. Police-Constable Burgess, who was approaching from the other direction, reached it at almost the same moment, and, turning on his lantern, stood gaping with astonishment. "Anything wrong?" he demanded.

"Wrong?" panted the sergeant-major, trying to put a little surprise and dignity into his voice. "No."

"I thought it was a lady walking in her sleep at first," said the constable. "A tall lady."

The sergeant-major suddenly became conscious of the nightgown. "I've been—for a little walk," he said, still breathing hard. "I felt a bit chilly—so I—put this on."

"Suits you, too," said the constable, stiffly. "But you Army men always was a bit dressy. Now if *I* put that on I should look ridikerlous."

The door opened before Mr. Ward could reply, and revealed, in the light of a bedroom candle, the astonished countenances of his wife and daughter.

"*George!*" exclaimed Mrs. Ward.

The Vigil

"Father!" said Miss Ward.

The sergeant-major tottered in and, gaining the front room, flung himself into his arm-chair. A stiff glass of whisky and water, handed him by his daughter, was swallowed at a gulp.

"Did you go?" inquired Mrs. Ward, clasping her hands.

The sergeant-major, fully conscious of the suspicions aroused by his disordered appearance, rallied his faculties. "Not likely," he said, with a short laugh. "After I got outside I knew it was no good going there to look for that young snippet. He'd no more think of going there than he would of flying. I walked a little way down the road—for exercise—and then strolled back."

"But—my nightgown?" said the wondering Mrs. Ward.

"Put it on to frighten the constable," said her husband.

He stood up and allowed her to help him pull it off. His face was flushed and his hair tousled, but the bright fierceness of his eye

The Vigil

was unquenched. In submissive silence she followed him to bed.

He was up late next morning, and made but a poor breakfast. His after-dinner nap was disturbed, and tea was over before he had regained his wonted calm. An hour later the arrival of a dignified and reproachful Mr. Farrer set him blazing again.

"I have come to see you about last night," said Mr. Farrer, before the other could speak. "A joke's a joke, but when you said you would come I naturally expected you would keep your word."

"Keep my word?" repeated the sergeant-major, almost choking with wrath.

"I stayed there in that lonely cottage from twelve to three, as per agreement, waiting for you," said Mr. Farrer.

"You were not there," shouted the sergeant-major.

"How do you know?" inquired the other.

The sergeant-major looked round helplessly at his wife and daughter.

The Vigil

"Prove it," said Mr. Farrer, pushing his advantage. "You questioned my courage, and I stayed there three hours. Where were you?"

"You were not there," said the sergeant-major. "I *know*. You can't bluff me. You were afraid."

"I was there, and I'll swear it," said Mr. Farrer. "Still, there's no harm done. I'll go there again to-night, and I'll dare you to come for me?"

"Dare?" said the sergeant-major, choking. "Dare?"

"Dare," repeated the other; "and if you don't come this time I'll spread it all over Marcham. To-morrow night you can go there and wait for me. If you see what I saw——"

"Oh, Ted!" said Miss Ward, with a shiver.

"Saw?" said the sergeant-major, starting.

"Nothing harmful," said Mr. Farrer, calmly.

"As a matter of fact, it was very interesting."

"What was?" demanded the sergeant-major.

The Vigil

"It sounds rather silly, as a matter of fact," said Mr. Farrer, slowly. "Still, I did see a broken bough moving about the garden."

Mr. Ward regarded him open-mouthed.

"Anything else?" he inquired, in a husky voice.

"A figure in white," said Mr. Farrer, "with long waving arms, hopping about like a frog. I don't suppose you believe me, but if you come to-night perhaps you'll see it yourself. It's very interesting."

"Wer—weren't you frightened?" inquired the staring Mrs. Ward.

Mr. Farrer shook his head. "It would take more than that to frighten me," he said, simply. "I should be ashamed of myself to be afraid of a poor thing like that. It couldn't do me any harm."

"Did you see its face?" inquired Mrs. Ward, nervously.

Mr. Farrer shook his head.

"What sort of a body had it got?" said her daughter.

The Vigil

"So far as I could see, very good," said Mr. Farrer. "Very good figure—not tall, but well made."

An incredible suspicion that had been forming in the sergeant-major's mind began to take shape. "Did you see anything else?" he asked, sharply.

"One more," said Mr. Farrer, regarding him pleasantly. "One I call the Running Ghost."

"Run——" began the sergeant-major, and stopped suddenly.

"It came in at the front gate," pursued Mr. Farrer. "A tall, well-knit figure of martial bearing—much about your height, Mr. Ward—with a beautiful filmy white robe down to its knees——"

He broke off in mild surprise, and stood gazing at Miss Ward, who, with her handkerchief to her mouth, was rocking helplessly in her chair.

"Knees," he repeated, quietly. "It came slowly down the path, and half-way to the

The Vigil

house it stopped, and in a frightened sort of voice called out my name. I was surprised, naturally, but before I could get to it—to reassure it——”

“That’ll do,” said the sergeant-major, rising hastily and drawing himself up to his full height.

“You asked me,” said Mr. Farrer, in an aggrieved voice.

“I know I did,” said the sergeant-major, breathing heavily. “I know I did; but if I sit here listening to any more of your lies I shall be ill. The best thing you can do is to take that giggling girl out and give her a breath of fresh air. I have done with her.”

EASY MONEY

Easy Money

A LAD of about twenty stepped ashore from the schooner *Jane*, and joining a girl, who had been avoiding for some ten minutes the ardent gaze of the night-watchman, set off arm-in-arm. The watchman rolled his eyes and shook his head slowly.

Nearly all his money on 'is back, he said, and what little bit 'e's got over he'll spend on 'er. And three months arter they're married he'll wonder wot 'e ever saw in her. If a man marries he wishes he 'adn't, and if he doesn't marry he wishes he 'ad. That's life.

Looking at them two young fools reminds me of a nevy of Sam Small's; a man I think I've spoke to you of afore. As a rule Sam didn't talk much about 'is relations, but there

Easy Money

was a sister of 'is in the country wot 'e was rather fond of because 'e 'adn't seen 'er for twenty years. She 'ad got a boy wot 'ad just got a job in London, and when 'e wrote and told 'er he was keeping company with the handsomest and loveliest and best 'arted gal in the whole wide world, she wrote to Sam about it and asked 'im to give 'is nevy some good advice.

Sam 'ad just got back from China and was living with Peter Russet and Ginger Dick as usual, and arter reading the letter about seven times and asking Ginger how 'e spelt "minx," 'e read the letter out loud to them and asked 'em what they thought about it.

Ginger shook his 'ead, and, arter thinking a bit, Peter shook his too.

"She's caught 'im rather young," ses Ginger.

"They get it bad at that age too," ses Peter.

"When I was twenty, there was a gal as I was fond of, and a regiment couldn't ha' parted us."

"Wot did part you then?" ses Sam.

Easy Money

"Another gal," ses Peter; "a gal I took a fancy to, that's wot did it."

"I was nearly married when I was twenty," ses Ginger, with a far-away look in his eyes. "She was the most beautiful gal I ever saw in my life; she 'ad one 'undred pounds a year of 'er own and she couldn't bear me out of her sight. If a thump acrost the chest would do that cough of yours any good, Sam——"

"Don't take no notice of 'im, Ginger," ses Peter. "Why didn't you marry 'er?"

"'Cos I was afraid she might think I was arter 'er money," ses Ginger, getting a little bit closer to Sam.

Peter 'ad another turn then, and him and Ginger kept on talking about gals whose 'arts they 'ad broke till Sam didn't know what to do with 'imself.

"I'll just step round and see my nevy, while you and Peter are amusing each other," he ses at last. "I'll ask 'im to come round to-morrow and then you can give 'im good advice."

The nevy came round next evening. Bright,

Easy Money

cheerful young chap 'e was, and he agreed with everything they said. When Peter said as 'ow all gals was deceivers, he said he'd known it for years, but they was born that way and couldn't 'elp it; and when Ginger said that no man ought to marry afore he was fifty, he corrected 'im and made it fifty-five.

"I'm glad to 'ear you talk like that," ses Ginger.

"So am I," ses Peter.

"He's got his 'ead screwed on right," ses Sam, wot thought his sister 'ad made a mistake.

"I'm surprised when I look round at the wimmen men 'ave married," ses the nevy; "wot they could 'ave seen in them I can't think. Me and my young lady often laugh about it."

"Your wot?" ses Sam, pretending to be very surprised.

"My young lady," ses the nevy.

Sam gives a cough. "I didn't know you'd got a young lady," he ses.

Easy Money

"Well, I 'ave," ses his nevy, "and we're going to be married at Christmas."

"But—but you ain't fifty-five," ses Ginger.

"I'm twenty-one," ses the nevy, "but my case is different. There isn't another young lady like mine in the world. She's different to all the others, and it ain't likely I'm going to let 'er be snapped up by somebody else. Fifty-five! Why, 'ow I'm to wait till Christmas I don't know. She's the prettiest and handsomest gal in the world; and she's the cleverest one I ever met. You ought to hear 'er laugh. Like music it is. You'd never forget it."

"Twenty-one is young," ses Ginger, shaking his 'ead. "'Ave you known 'er long?"

"Three months," ses the nevy. "She lives in the same street as I do. 'Ow it is she ain't been snapped up before, I can't think, but she told me that she didn't care for men till she saw me."

"They all say that," ses Ginger.

Easy Money

"If I've 'ad it said to me once, I've 'ad it said twenty times," ses Peter, nodding.

"They do it to flatter," ses old Sam, looking as if 'e knew all about it. "You wait till you are my age, Joe; then you'll know; why I should ha' been married dozens o' times if I 'adn't been careful."

"P'r'aps it was a bit on both sides," ses Joe, looking at 'is uncle. "P'r'aps they was careful too. If you only saw my young lady, you wouldn't talk like that. She's got the truth-fullest eyes in the world. Large grey eyes like a child's, leastways sometimes they are grey and sometimes they are blue. It seems to depend on the light somehow; I 'ave seen them when they was a brown—brownish-gold. And she smiles with 'er eyes."

"Hasn't she got a mouth?" ses Ginger, wot was getting a bit tired of it.

"You've been crossed in love," ses the nevy, staring at 'im. "That's wot's the matter with you. And looking at you, I don't wonder at it."

Easy Money

Ginger 'arf got up, but Sam gave him a look and 'e sat down agin, and then they all sat quiet while the nevy went on telling them about 'is gal.

"I should like to see 'er," ses his uncle at last.

"Call round for me at seven to-morrow night," ses the young 'un, "and I'll introduce you."

"We might look in on our way," ses Sam, arter Ginger and Peter 'ad both made eyes at 'im. "We're going out to spend the evening."

"The more the merrier," ses his nevy. "Well, so long; I expect she's waiting for me."

He got up and said good-bye, and arter he 'ad gorn, Sam and the other two shook their 'eads together and said what a pity it was to be twenty-one. Ginger said it made 'im sad to think of it, and Peter said 'ow any gal could look at a man under thirty, 'e couldn't think.

They all went round to the nevy's the next evening. They was a little bit early owing

Easy Money

to Ginger's watch 'aving been set right by guess-work, and they 'ad to sit in a row on the nevy's bed waiting while 'e cleaned 'imself, and changed his clothes. Although it was only Wednesday 'e changed his collar, and he was so long making up 'is mind about his necktie that 'is uncle tried to make it up for him. By the time he 'ad finished Sam said it made 'im think it was Sunday.

Miss Gill was at 'ome when they got there, and all three of 'em was very much surprised that such a good-looking gal should take up with Sam's nevy. Ginger nearly said so, but Peter gave 'im a dig in the back just in time and 'e called him something under 'is breath instead.

"Why shouldn't we all make an evening of it?" ses Ginger, arter they 'ad been talking for about ten minutes, and the nevy 'ad looked at the clock three or four times.

"Because two's company," ses Mrs. Gill. "Why you was young yourself once. Can't you remember?"

Easy Money

"He's young now, mother," ses the gal, giving Ginger a nice smile.

"I tell you wot we might do," ses Mrs. Gill, putting 'er finger to her forehead and considering. "You and Joe go out and 'ave your evening, and me and these gentlemen'll go off together somewhere. I shall enjoy an outing; I ain't 'ad one for a long time."

Ginger said it would be very nice if she thought it wouldn't make 'er too tired, and afore Sam or Peter could think of anything to say, she was upstairs putting 'er bonnet on. They thought o' plenty to say while they was sitting alone with Ginger waiting for 'er.

"My idea was for the gal and your nevy to come too," ses pore Ginger. "Then I thought we might lose 'im and I would 'ave a little chat with the gal, and show 'er 'ow foolish she was."

"Well, you've done it now," ses Sam. "Spoilt our evening."

"P'r'aps good will come out of it," ses Ginger. "If the old lady takes a fancy to us

Easy Money

we shall be able to come agin, and then to please you, Sam, I'll have a go to cut your nevy out."

Sam stared at 'im, and Peter stared too, and then they looked at each other and began to laugh till Ginger forgot where 'e was and offered to put Sam through the winder. They was still quarrelling under their breath and saying wot they'd like to do to each other when Mrs. Gill came downstairs. Dressed up to the nines she was, and they walked down the street with a feeling that everybody was looking at 'em.

One thing that 'elped to spoil the evening was that Mrs. Gill wouldn't go into public-'ouses, but to make up for it she went into sweet-stuff shops three times and 'ad ices while they stood and watched 'er and wondered 'ow she could do it. And arter that she stopped at a place Poplar way, where there was a few swings and roundabouts and things. She was as skittish as a school-gal, and arter taking pore Sam on the roundabout till 'e didn't know

Easy Money

whether he was on his 'eels or his 'ead, she got 'im into a boat-swing and swung 'im till he felt like a boy on 'is fust v'y'ge. Arter that she took 'im to the rifle gallery, and afore he had 'ad three shots the man took the gun away from 'im and threatened to send for the police.

It was an expensive evening for all of them, but as Ginger said when they got 'ome they 'ad broken the ice, and he bet Peter Russet 'arf a dollar that afore two days 'ad passed he'd take the nevy's gal for a walk. He stepped round by 'imself the next arternoon and made 'imself agreeable to Mrs. Gill, and the day arter they was both so nice and kind that 'e plucked up 'is courage and offered to take Miss Gill to the Zoo.

She said "No" at fust, of course, but arter Ginger 'ad pointed out that Joe was at work all day and couldn't take 'er 'imself, and that 'e was Joe's uncle's best pal, she began to think better of it.

"Why not?" ses her mother. "Joe wouldn't

Easy Money

mind. He wouldn't be so silly as to be jealous o' Mr. Ginger Dick."

"Of course not," ses the gal. "There's nothing to be jealous of."

She let 'er mother and Ginger persuade 'er arter a time, and then she went upstairs to clean herself, and put on a little silver brooch that Ginger said he 'ad picked up coming along.

She took about three-quarters of an hour to get ready, but when she came down, Ginger felt that it was quite worth it. He couldn't take 'is eyes off 'er, as the saying goes, and 'e sat by 'er side on the top of the omnibus like a man in a dream.

"This is better than being at sea," he ses at last.

"Don't you like the sea?" ses the gal. "I should like to go to sea myself."

"I shouldn't mind the sea if you was there," ses Ginger.

Miss Gill turned her 'ead away. "You mustn't talk to me like that," she ses in a soft voice. "Still——"

Easy Money

"Still wot?" ses Ginger, arter waiting a long time.

"I mean, if I did go to sea, it *would* be nice to have a friend on board," she ses. "I suppose you ain't afraid of storms, are you?"

"I like 'em," ses Ginger.

"You look as if you would," ses the gal, giving 'im a little look under 'er eyelashes. "It must be nice to be a man and be brave. I wish I was a man."

"I don't," ses Ginger.

"Why not?" ses the gal, turning her 'ead away agin.

Ginger didn't answer, he gave 'er elbow a little squeeze instead. She took it away at once, and Ginger was just wishing he 'adn't been so foolish, when it came back agin, and they sat for a long time without speaking a word.

"The sea is all right for some things," ses Ginger at last, "but suppose a man married!"

The gal shook her 'ead. "It would be

Easy Money

hard on 'is wife," she ses, with another little look at 'im, "but—but——"

Ginger pinched 'er elbow agin.

"But p'r'aps he could get a job ashore," she ses, "and then he could take his wife out for a bus-ride every day."

They 'ad to change buses arter a time, and they got on a wrong bus and went miles out o' their way, but neither of 'em seemed to mind. Ginger said he was thinking of something else, and the gal said she was too. They got to the Zoological Gardens at last, and Ginger said he 'ad never enjoyed himself so much. When the lions roared she squeezed his arm, and when they 'ad an elephant ride she was holding on to 'im with both 'ands.

"I am enjoying myself," she ses, as Ginger 'elped her down and said "*whoa*" to the elephant. "I know it's wicked, but I can't 'elp it, and wot's more, I'm afraid I don't want to 'elp it."

She let Ginger take 'er arm when she nearly tripped up over a peppermint ball some kid

Easy Money

'ad dropped; and, arter a little persuasion, she 'ad a bottle of lemonade and six bath-buns at a refreshment stall for dinner.

She was as nice as she could be to him, but by the time they started for 'ome, she 'ad turned so quiet that Ginger began to think 'e must 'ave offended 'er in some way.

"Are you tired?" he ses.

"No," ses the gal, shaking her 'ead, "I've enjoyed myself very much."

"I thought you seemed a bit tired," ses Ginger, arter waiting a long time.

"I'm not tired," ses the gal, giving 'im a sad sort o' little smile, "but I'm a little bit worried, that's all."

"Worried?" ses Ginger, very tender. "Wot's worrying you?"

"Oh, I can't tell you," ses Miss Gill. "It doesn't matter; I'll try and cheer up. Wot a lovely day it is, isn't it? I shall remember it all my life."

"Wot is it worrying you?" ses Ginger, in a determined voice. "Can't you tell *me*?"

Easy Money

"No," ses the gal, shaking her 'ead, "I can't tell you because you might want to 'elp me, and I couldn't allow that."

"Why shouldn't I 'elp you?" ses Ginger. "It's wot we was put 'ere for: to 'elp one another."

"I couldn't tell you," ses the gal, just dabbing at 'er eyes with a lace pocket-'ankercher about one and a 'arf times the size of 'er nose.

"Not if I ask you to?" ses Ginger.

Miss Gill shook 'er 'ead, and then she tried her 'ardest to turn the conversation. She talked about the weather, and the monkey-'ouse, and a gal in 'er street whose 'air changed from red to black in a single night; but it was all no good, Ginger wouldn't be put off, and at last she ses——

"Well," she ses, "if you must know, I'm in a difficulty; I 'ave got to get three pounds, and where to get it I don't know any more than the man in the moon. Now let's talk about something else."

"Do you owe it?" ses Ginger.

Easy Money

"I can't tell you any more," ses Miss Gill, "and I wouldn't 'ave told you that only you asked me, and somehow I feel as though I 'ave to tell you things, when you want me to."

"Three pounds ain't much," ses pore Ginger, wot 'ad just been paid off arter a long v'y'ge. "I can let you 'ave it and welcome."

Miss Gill started away from 'im as though she 'ad been stung, and it took 'im all his time to talk 'er round agin. When he 'ad she begged 'is pardon and said he was the most generous man she 'ad ever met, but it couldn't be.

"I don't know when I could pay it back," she ses, "but I thank you all the same for offering it."

"Pay it back when you like," ses Ginger, "and if you never pay it back, it don't matter."

He offered 'er the money four or five times, but she wouldn't take it, but at last just as they got near her 'ouse he forced it in her 'and, and put his own 'ands in his pockets when she tried to make 'im take it back.

Easy Money

"You are good to me," she ses arter they 'ad gone inside and 'er mother 'ad gone upstairs arter giving Ginger a bottle o' beer to amuse 'imself with; "I shall never forget you. Never."

"I 'ope not," ses Ginger, starting. "Are you coming out agin to-morrow?"

"I'm afraid I can't," ses Miss Gill, shaking her 'ead and looking sorrowful.

"Not with *me*?" ses Ginger, sitting down beside her on the sofa and putting 'is arm so that she could lean against it if she wanted to.

"I don't think I can," ses the gal, leaning back very gentle.

"Think agin," ses Ginger, squeezing 'er waist a little.

Miss Gill shook her 'ead, and then turned and looked at 'im. Her face was so close to his, that, thinking that she 'ad put it there a-purpose, he kissed it, and the next moment 'e got a clout that made his 'ead ring.

"'Ow dare you!" she ses, jumping up with a scream. "'Ow dare you! 'Ow dare——"

Easy Money

"Wot's the matter?" ses her mother, coming downstairs like a runaway barrel of treacle.

"He—he's insulted me," ses Miss Gill, taking out her little 'ankercher and sobbing. "He—k—kissed me!"

"Wot!" ses Mrs. Gill. "Well, I'd never 'ave believed it! Never! Why 'e ought to be taken up. Wot d'ye mean by it?" she ses, turning on pore Ginger.

Ginger tried to explain, but it was all no good, and two minutes arterwards 'e was walking back to 'is lodgings like a dog with its tail between its legs. His 'ead was going round and round with astonishment, and 'e was in such a temper that 'e barged into a man twice as big as himself and then offered to knock his 'ead off when 'e objected. And when Sam and Peter asked him 'ow he 'ad got on, he was in such a state of mind it was all 'e could do to answer 'em.

"And I'll trouble you for my 'arf dollar, Peter," he ses; "I've been out with 'er all day, and I've won my bet."

Easy Money

Peter paid it over like a lamb, and then 'e sat thinking 'ard for a bit.

"Are you going out with 'er agin to-morrow, Ginger?" he ses, arter a time.

"I don't know," ses Ginger, careless-like, "I ain't made up my mind yet."

Peter looked at 'im and then 'e looked at Sam and winked. "Let me 'ave a try," he ses; "I'll bet you another 'arf dollar that I take 'er out. P'r'aps I shall come 'ome in a better temper than wot you 'ave."

Old Sam said it wasn't right to play with a gal's 'art in that way, but arter a lot o' talking and telling Sam to shut up, Ginger took the bet. He was quite certain in his own mind that Miss Gill would slam the door in Peter's face, and arter he 'ad started off next morning, Ginger and Sam waited in to 'ave the pleasure of laughing in 'is face.

They got tired of waiting at last, and went out to enjoy themselves, and breathe the fresh air in a pub down Poplar way. They got back at seven o'clock, and ten minutes

Easy Money

arterwards Peter came in and sat down on his bed and began to smoke without a word.

"Had a good time?" ses Ginger.

"Rippin'," ses Peter, holding 'is pipe tight between 'is teeth. "You owe me 'arf a dollar, Ginger."

"Where'd you go?" ses Ginger, passing it over.

"Crystal Pallis," ses Peter.

"Are you going to take 'er out to-morrow?" ses Sam.

"I don't think so," ses Peter, taking 'is pipe out of 'is mouth and yawning. "She's rather too young for me; I like talking to gals wot's a bit older. I won't stand in Ginger's way."

"I found 'er a bit young too," ses Ginger. "P'r'aps we'd better let Sam's nevy 'ave 'er. Arter all it's a bit rough on 'im when you come to think of it."

"You're quite right," ses Peter, jumping up. "It's Sam's business, and why we should go out of our way and inconvenience ourselves to do 'im a good turn, I don't know."

Easy Money

"It's Sam all over," ses Ginger; "he's always been like that, and the more you try to oblige 'im, the more you may."

They went on abusing Sam till he got sick and tired of it, and arter telling 'em wot he thought of 'em he slammed the door and went out and spent the evening by 'imself. He would 'ardly speak to them next day, but arter tea he brightened up a bit and they went off together as if nothing 'ad happened, and the fust thing they saw as they turned out of their street was Sam's nevy coming along smiling till it made their faces ache to look at him.

"I was just coming to see you," he ses.

"We're just off—on business," ses Ginger.

"I wasn't going to stop," ses the nevy; "my young lady just told me to step along and show uncle wot she has bought me. A silver watch and chain and a gold ring. Look at it!"

He held his 'and under Ginger's nose, and Ginger stood there looking at it and opening and shutting 'is mouth like a dying fish. Then

Easy Money

he took Peter by the arm and led 'im away while the nevy was opening 'is new watch and showing Sam the works.

"'Ow much did she get out of *you*, Peter?" ses Ginger, looking at 'im very hard. "I don't want any lies."

"Three quid," ses Peter, staring at 'im.

"Same 'ere," ses Ginger, grinding his teeth. "Did she give you a smack on the side of your face?"

"Wot—are—you—talking about, Ginger?" ses Peter.

"Did she smack your face *too*?" ses Ginger.

"Yes," ses Peter.

HIS OTHER SELF

His Other Self

“**T**HEY'RE as like as two peas, him and 'is brother,” said the night-watchman, gazing blandly at the indignant face of the lighterman on the barge below; “and the on'y way I know this one is Sam is because Bill don't use bad langwidge. Twins they are, but the likeness is only outside; Bill's 'art is as white as snow.”

He cut off a plug of tobacco, and, placing it in his cheek, waited expectantly.

“White as snow,” he repeated.

“That's me,” said the lighterman, as he pushed his unwieldy craft from the jetty. “I'll tell Sam your opinion of 'im. So long.”

The watchman went a shade redder than usual. That's twins all over, he said, sourly,

His Other Self

always deceiving people. It's Bill arter all, and, instead of hurting 'is feelings, I've just been flattering of 'im up.

It ain't the fust time I've 'ad trouble over a likeness. I've been a twin myself in a manner o' speaking. It didn't last long, but it lasted long enough for me to always be sorry for twins, and to make a lot of allowance for them. It must be very 'ard to have another man going about with your face on 'is shoulders, and getting it into trouble.

It was a year or two ago now. I was sitting one evening at the gate, smoking a pipe and looking at a newspaper I 'ad found in the office, when I see a gentleman coming along from the swing-bridge. Well-dressed, clean-shaved chap 'e was, smoking a cigarette. He was walking slow and looking about 'im casual-like, until his eyes fell on me, when he gave a perfect jump of surprise, and, arter looking at me very 'ard, walked on a little way and then turned back. He did it twice, and I was just going to say something to 'im,

His Other Self

something that I 'ad been getting ready for 'im, when he spoke to me.

"Good evening," he ses.

"Good evening," I ses, folding the paper over and looking at 'im rather severe.

"I hope you'll excuse me staring," he ses, very perlite; "but I've never seen such a face and figger as yours in all my life—never."

"Ah, you ought to ha' seen me a few years ago," I ses. "I'm like everybody else—I'm getting on."

"Rubbish!" he ses. "You couldn't be better if you tried. It's marvellous! Wonderful! It's the very thing I've been looking for. Why, if you'd been made to order you couldn't ha' been better."

I thought at fust he was by way of trying to get a drink out o' me—I've been played that game afore—but instead o' that he asked me whether I'd do 'im the pleasure of 'aving one with 'im.

We went over to the Albion, and I believe I could have 'ad it in a pail if I'd on'y liked

His Other Self

to say the word. And all the time I was drinking he was looking me up and down, till I didn't know where to look, as the saying is.

"I came down 'ere to look for somebody like you," he ses, "but I never dreamt I should have such luck as this. I'm an actor, and I've got to play the part of a sailor, and I've been worried some time 'ow to make up for the part. D'ye understand?"

"No," I ses, looking at 'im.

"I want to look the real thing," he ses, speaking low so the landlord shouldn't hear. "I want to make myself the living image of you. If that don't fetch 'em I'll give up the stage and grow cabbages."

"Make yourself like me?" I ses. "Why, you're no more like me than I'm like a sea-sick monkey."

"Not so much," he ses. "That's where the art comes in."

He stood me another drink, and then, taking my arm in a cuddling sort o' way, and calling me "Dear boy," 'e led me back to

His Other Self

the wharf and explained. He said 'e would come round next evening with wot 'e called his make-up box, and paint 'is face and make 'imself up till people wouldn't know one from the other.

"And wot about your figger?" I ses, looking at 'im.

"A cushion," he ses, winking, "or maybe a couple. And what about clothes? You'll 'ave to sell me those you've got on. Hat and all. And boots."

I put a price on 'em that I thought would 'ave finished 'im then and there, but it didn't. And at last, arter paying me so many more compliments that they began to get into my 'ead, he fixed up a meeting for the next night and went off.

"And mind," he ses, coming back, "not a word to a living soul!"

He went off agin, and, arter going to the Bull's Head and 'aving a pint to clear my 'ead, I went and sat down in the office and thought it over. It seemed all right to me

His Other Self

as far as I could see; but p'r'aps the pint didn't clear my 'ead enough—p'r'aps I ought to 'ave 'ad two pints.

I lay awake best part of next day thinking it over, and when I got up I 'ad made up my mind. I put my clothes in a sack, and then I put on some others as much like 'em as possible, on'y p'r'aps a bit older, in case the missis should get asking questions; and then I sat wondering 'ow to get out with the sack without 'er noticing it. She's got a very inquiring mind, and I wasn't going to tell her any lies about it. Besides which I couldn't think of one.

I got out at last by playing a game on her. I pertended to drop 'arf a dollar in the washus, and while she was busy on 'er hands and knees I went off as comfortable as you please.

I got into the office with it all right, and, just as it was getting dark, a cab drove up to the wharf and the actor-chap jumped out with a big leather bag. I took 'im into the



I got out at last by playing a game on her

His Other Self

private office, and 'e was so ready with 'is money for the clothes that I offered to throw the sack in.

He changed into my clothes fust of all, and then, asking me to sit down in front of 'im, he took a looking-glass and a box out of 'is bag and began to alter 'is face. Wot with sticks of coloured paint, and false eye-brows, and a beard stuck on with gum and trimmed with a pair o' scissors, it was more like a conjuring trick than anything else. Then 'e took a wig out of 'is bag and pressed it on his 'ead, put on the cap, put some black stuff on 'is teeth, and there he was. We both looked into the glass together while 'e gave the finishing touches, and then he clapped me on the back and said I was the handsomest sailorman in England.

"I shall have to make up a bit 'eavier when I'm behind the floats," he ses; "but this is enough for 'ere. Wot do you think of the imitation of your voice? I think I've got it exact."

His Other Self

"If you ask me," I ses, "it sounds like a poll-parrot with a cold in the 'ead."

"And now for your walk," he ses, looking as pleased as if I'd said something else. "Come to the door and see me go up the wharf."

I didn't like to hurt 'is feelings, but I thought I should ha' bust. He walked up that wharf like a dancing-bear in a pair of trousers too tight for it, but 'e was so pleased with 'imself that I didn't like to tell 'im so. He went up and down two or three times, and I never saw anything so ridikerlous in my life.

"That's all very well for us," he ses; "but wot about other people? That's wot I want to know. I'll go and 'ave a drink, and see whether anybody spots me."

Afore I could stop 'im he started off to the Bull's Head and went in, while I stood outside and watched 'im.

"'Arf a pint o' four ale," he ses, smacking down a penny.

I see the landlord draw the beer and give

His Other Self

it to 'im, but 'e didn't seem to take no notice of 'im. Then, just to open 'is eyes a bit, I walked in and put down a penny and asked for a 'arf-pint.

The landlord was just wiping down the counter at the time, and when I gave my order he looked up and stood staring at me with the wet cloth 'eld up in the air. He didn't say a word—not a single word. He stood there for a moment smiling at us foolish-like, and then 'e let go o' the beer-injin, wot 'e was 'olding in 'is left hand, and sat down heavy on the bar floor. We both put our 'eads over the counter to see wot had 'appened to 'im, and 'e started making the most 'orrible noise I 'ave ever heard in my life. I wonder it didn't bring the fire-injins. The actor-chap bolted out as if he'd been shot, and I was just thinking of follering 'im when the landlord's wife and 'is two daughters came rushing out and asking me wot I 'ad done to him.

“There—there—was two of 'im!” ses the

His Other Self

landlord, trembling and holding on to 'is wife's arm, as they helped 'im up and got 'im in the chair. "Two of 'im!"

"Two of wot?" ses his wife.

"Two—two watchmen," ses the landlord; "both exac'ly alike and both asking for 'arf a pint o' four ale."

"Yes, yes," ses 'is wife.

"You come and lay down, pa," ses the gals.

"I tell you there was," ses the landlord, getting 'is colour back, with temper.

"Yes, yes; I know all about it," ses 'is wife.

"You come inside for a bit; and, Gertie, you bring your father in a soda—a large soda."

They got 'im in arter a lot o' trouble; but three times 'e came back as far as the door, 'olding on to them, and taking a little peep at me. The last time he shook his 'ead at me, and said if I did it agin I could go and get my 'arf-pints somewhere else.

I finished the beer wot the actor 'ad left, and, arter telling the landlord I 'oped his eyesight 'ud be better in the morning, I went

His Other Self

outside, and arter a careful look round walked back to the wharf.

I pushed the wicket open a little way and peeped in. The actor was standing just by the fust crane talking to two of the hands off of the *Saltram*. He'd got 'is back to the light, but 'ow it was they didn't twig his voice I can't think.

They was so busy talking that I crept along by the side of the wall and got to the office without their seeing me. I went into the private office and turned out the gas there, and sat down to wait for 'im. Then I 'eard a noise outside that took me to the door agin and kept me there, 'olding on to the door-post and gasping for my breath. The cook of the *Saltram* was sitting on a paraffin-cask playing the mouth-organ, and the actor, with 'is arms folded across his stummick, was dancing a horn-pipe as if he'd gorn mad.

I never saw anything so ridikerlous in my life, and when I recollected that they thought it was *me*, I thought I should ha' dropped.

His Other Self

A night-watchman can't be too careful, and I knew that it 'ud be all over Wapping next morning that I 'ad been dancing to a tuppenny-ha'penny mouth-organ played by a ship's cook. A man that does 'is dooty always has a lot of people ready to believe the worst of 'im.

I went back into the dark office and waited, and by and by I 'eard them coming along to the gate and patting 'im on the back and saying he ought to be in a pantermime instead o' wasting 'is time night-watching. He left 'em at the gate, and then 'e came into the office smiling as if he'd done something clever.

"Wot d'ye think of me for a understudy?" he ses, laughing. "They all thought it was you. There wasn't one of 'em 'ad the slightest suspicion—not one."

"And wot about my character?" I ses, folding my arms acrost my chest and looking at him.

"Character?" he ses, staring. "Why, there's no 'arm in dancing; it's a innercent enjoyment."

His Other Self

"It ain't one o' my innercent enjoyments," I ses, "and I don't want to get the credit of it. If they hadn't been sitting in a pub all the evening they'd 'ave spotted you at once."

"Oh!" he ses, very huffy. "How?"

"Your voice," I ses. "You try and mimic a poll-parrot, and think it's like me. And, for another thing, you walk about as though you're stuffed with sawdust."

"I beg your pardon," he ses; "the voice and the walk are exact. Exact."

"*Wot?*" I ses, looking 'im up and down. "You stand there and 'ave the impudence to tell me that my voice is like that?"

"I do," he ses.

"Then I'm sorry for you," I ses. "I thought you'd got more sense."

He stood looking at me and gnawing 'is finger, and by and by he ses, "Are you married?" he ses.

"I am," I ses, very short.

"Where do you live?" he ses.

I told 'im.

His Other Self

"Very good," he ses; "p'r'aps I'll be able to convince you arter all. By the way, wot do you call your wife? Missis?"

"Yes," I ses, staring at him. "But wot's it got to do with you?"

"Nothing," he ses. "Nothing. Only I'm going to try the poll-parrot voice and the sawdust walk on her, that's all. If I can deceive 'er that'll settle it."

"Deceive *her*?" I ses. "Do you think I'm going to let you go round to my 'ouse and get me into trouble with the missis like that? Why, you must be crazy; that dancing must 'ave got into your 'ead."

"Where's the 'arm?" he ses, very sulky.

"'Arm?" I ses. "I won't 'ave it, that's all; and if you knew my missis you'd know without any telling."

"I'll bet you a pound to a sixpence she wouldn't know me," he ses, very earnest.

"She won't 'ave the chance," I ses, "so that's all about it."

He stood there argufying for about ten

His Other Self

minutes; but I was as firm as a rock. I wouldn't move an inch, and at last, arter we was both on the point of losing our tempers, he picked up his bag and said as 'ow he must be getting off 'ome.

"But ain't you going to take those things off fust?" I ses.

"No," he ses, smiling. "I'll wait till I get 'ome. Ta-ta."

He put 'is bag on 'is shoulder and walked to the gate, with me follering of 'im.

"I expect I shall see a cab soon," he ses. "Good-bye."

"Wot are you laughing at?" I ses.

"On'y thoughts," he ses.

"'Ave you got far to go?" I ses.

"No; just about the same distance as you 'ave," he ses, and he went off spluttering like a soda-water bottle.

I took the broom and 'ad a good sweep-up arter he 'ad gorn, and I was just in the middle of it when the cook and the other two chaps from the *Saltram* came back, with three other

His Other Self

sailormen and a brewer's drayman they 'ad brought to see me DANCE!

"Same as you did a little while ago, Bill," ses the cook, taking out 'is beastly mouth-organ and wiping it on 'is sleeve. "Wot toon would you like?"

I couldn't get away from 'em, and when I told them I 'ad never danced in my life the cook asked me where I expected to go to. He told the drayman that I'd been dancing like a fairy in sea-boots, and they all got in front of me and wouldn't let me pass. I lost my temper at last, and, arter they 'ad taken the broom away from me and the drayman and one o' the sailormen 'ad said wot they'd do to me if I was on'y fifty years younger, they sheered off.

I locked the gate arter 'em and went back to the office, and I 'adn't been there above 'arf an hour when somebody started ringing the gate-bell as if they was mad. I thought it was the cook's lot come back at fust, so I opened the wicket just a trifle and peeped

His Other Self

out. There was a 'ansom-cab standing outside, and I 'ad hardly got my nose to the crack when the actor-chap, still in my clothes, pushed the door open and nipped in.

"You've lost," he ses, pushing the door to and smiling all over. "Where's your sixpence?"

"*Lost?*" I ses, hardly able to speak. "D'ye mean to tell me you've been to my wife arter all—arter all I said to you?"

"I do," he ses, nodding, and smiling agin. "They were both deceived as easy as easy."

"*Both?*" I ses, staring at 'im. "Both wot? 'Ow many wives d'ye think I've got? Wot d'ye mean by it?"

"Arter I left you," he ses, giving me a little poke in the ribs, "I picked up a cab and, fust leaving my bag at Aldgate, I drove on to your 'ouse and knocked at the door. I knocked twice, and then an angry-looking woman opened it and asked me wot I wanted.

"'It's all right, missis,' I ses. 'I've got

His Other Self

'arf an hour off, and I've come to take you out for a walk.'

" '*Wot?*' she ses, drawing back with a start.

" 'Just a little turn round to see the shops,' I ses; 'and if there's anything particler you'd like and it don't cost too much, you shall 'ave it.'

" 'I thought at fust, from the way she took it, she wasn't used to you giving 'er things.

" "'Ow dare you!' she ses. 'I'll 'ave you locked up. 'Ow dare you insult a respectable married woman! You wait till my 'usband comes 'ome.'

" 'But I am your 'usband,' I ses. 'Don't you know me, my pretty? Don't you know your pet sailor-boy?'

" 'She gave a screech like a steam-injin, and then she went next door and began knocking away like mad. Then I see that I 'ad gorn to number twelve instead of number fourteen. Your wife, your real wife, came out of number fourteen—and she was worse than

His Other Self

the other. But they both thought it was you—there's no doubt of that. They chased me all the way up the road, and if it 'adn't ha' been for this cab that was just passing I don't know wot would 'ave 'appened to me."

He shook his 'ead and smiled agin, and, arter opening the wicket a trifle and telling the cabman he shouldn't be long, he turned to me and asked me for the sixpence, to wear on his watch-chain.

"*Sixpence!*" I ses. "SIXPENCE!" Wot do you think is going to 'appen to me when I go 'ome?"

"Oh, I 'adn't thought o' that," he ses. "Yes, o' course."

"Wot about my wife's jealousy?" I ses. "Wot about the other, and her 'usband, a cooper as big as a 'ouse?"

"Well, well," he ses, "one can't think of everything. It'll be all the same a hundred years hence."

"Look 'ere," I ses, taking 'is shoulder in a grip of iron. "You come back with me now

His Other Self

in that cab and explain. D'ye see? That's wot you've got to do."

"All right," he ses; "certainly. Is—is the husband bad-tempered?"

"You'll see," I ses; "but that's your business. Come along."

"With pleasure," he ses, 'elping me in. "'Arf a mo' while I tell the cabby where to drive to."

He went to the back o' the cab, and afore I knew wot had 'appened the 'orse had got a flick over the head with the whip and was going along at a gallop. I kept putting the little flap up and telling the cabby to stop, but he didn't take the slightest notice. Arter I'd done it three times he kept it down so as I couldn't open it.

There was a crowd round my door when the cab drove up, and in the middle of it was my missis, the woman next door, and 'er husband, wot 'ad just come 'ome. 'Arf a dozen of 'em helped me out, and afore I could say a word the cabman drove off and left me there.

His Other Self

I dream of it now sometimes: standing there explaining and explaining, until, just as I feel I can't bear it any longer, two policemen come up and 'elp me indoors. If they had 'elped my missis outside it would be a easier dream to have.



436385

Jacobs, William Wymark
Night watches.

LE
J177n

DATE.	NAME OF BORROWER.
March 2/46	M. C. Blackburn
MAY 22 1946	W. C. Blackburn
	W. C. Blackburn

University of Toronto
Library

DO NOT
REMOVE
THE
CARD
FROM
THIS
POCKET



